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The Luxury Watch Collector Community: An Ethnographic Exploration into a Heterogeneous Community

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**A thesis submitted in the partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

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Declaration

This thesis is submitted to the University of Warwick in support of my application for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Marketing. It has been composed by myself and has not been submitted in any previous application for any degree at any other university. All the work presented here, including the data and analysis, was carried out by the author.

Parts of this thesis have been published:

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- refer to appendix 1 for manuscript

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Media Coverage of Doctoral Research

‘What do the Emerging Market Companies and Consumers See in British Luxury?’
News article on Warwick Business School website, May 2014

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Bloomberg Business Week

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China Connect

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Abstract

This thesis explores the heterogeneity of virtual-community members and their activities using the exemplar of a luxury-timepiece community. The research focuses on how networks of diverse members (i.e. consumers, collectors and producers) are maintained in a predominantly virtual-community setting. Whilst existing studies recognise virtual communities as a platform to facilitate communication and interaction between individuals, there has been no detailed exploration of a heterogeneous multi-brand virtual community or how members form communal positions and roles specifically within, a typical hybrid (based online and offline) community. By drawing on pioneering work on complex networks and their development in a business-to-business context from the International Marketing and Purchase (IMP) Group is drawn on and extends IMP frameworks to investigate member interactions, cooperation and conflict between members, and communal positions and roles, all of which influence how effective networks with hybrid communities are maintained.

The case selected is an internationally renowned, multi-brand, luxury-watch collector community. The findings are informed by an 18-month ethnographic study that employs immersive research techniques. Through the methods of active participation in online and offline settings, non-participant observation, semi-structured in-depth online and in-person interviews, and compilation of online discussion threads, the study offers a rich and complete understanding of the development and operation of the community, its network and its members.

This heterogeneous multi-brand hybrid community comprises of the management and moderating team, luxury-watch collectors and consumers, authorised and independent watch dealers, luxury-watch manufacturers and brands. Members are brought together by a shared commitment to and interest in category-specific luxury brands, an object (luxury watches) and an activity (collecting). The primary contribution of this study is that both cooperation and conflict shape the network in such a hybrid community through the social, economic and informational interactions. Based on the analysis, a paradoxical side of collecting is uncovered as members show in contradictory sets of motives and behaviours. The network of members is shaped by the characteristics of the community, such as the shared emotional connections, communal boundaries and group symbols, and exchange of support. The relevance of these characteristics extends beyond WatchZone to other collector communities. Findings illustrate that a social hierarchy exists, where collections serve an important function to demonstrate mastery and connoisseurship, whilst knowledge and expertise are a source of informal and formal power for members. The findings are relevant to brand managers and more generally marketing practitioners as WatchZone is an ideal venue to develop and nurture relationships with consumers on a more personal level.

List of abbreviations

Abbreviation	Description
210	A Panerai watch model, also known as a pam 210.
ADLC	Amorphous diamond-like carbon, a watch coating.
AP	Audemars Piguet, a Swiss watchmaker.
ARA	Activities-Resources-Actors.
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
Dato	Datograph, a watch model.
DuFour	Philippe DuFour, a French watchmaker.
e-WOM	Electronic word of mouth.
FHF	Fabriques d'Horlogerie de Fontainemelon; watch movement.
GP	Girard-Perregaux, a Swiss watchmaker.
GTGs	Get-togethers; a gathering of WatchZone members that occurs face-to-face.
HoMe	Horological Meandering, the name of the main WatchZone forum.
IMHO	In my humble opinion.
IMO	In my opinion.
IMP	Industrial Marketing and Purchasing.
JLC	Jaeger-Le Coultre, a watchmaker.
Lange	A. Lange & Söhne, a watchmaker.
LCD	Liquid-crystal display.
LED	Light-emitting diode.
LOL	Laughing out loud.
non-WIS	non-Watch Induced Schizophrenic / Watch Idiot Savant.
Pams	Panerai, a watchmaker.
PM	Private message; WatchZone functionality enables members to send internal private messages.
POTW	Purist of the Week; an activity where members are interviewed on their collections and collecting activities and the interview is then shared on WatchZone home forum.
PVD	Physical Vapour Deposition, a watch coating.
RM	Richard Mille, a watchmaker.
ROO	Royal Oak Offshore, An AP watch collection.
SIHH	Salon International De La Haute Horlogerie, an international watch convention.
TZ	TimeZone, an online watch enthusiast forum.
WIS	Watch Induced Schizophrenic or Watch Idiot Savant, the term is used to describe an avid watch enthusiast. The term was first popularised by members of the TimeZone forum.

Chapter I

Thesis Overview

This chapter offers a research overview. It discusses the research rationale and objectives of the study. The chapter concludes with an overview of the organisation of the thesis, where the content of each chapter is discussed.

1.1 Justification of the Study

Use of the Internet as a communication tool has significantly increased over the past three decades. McLuhan (1970) predicted that the ‘cool’ and inclusive ‘*electric media*’ would ‘*retribalize*’ society into groups or clusters of affiliation. Wysocki (1998) has found that the advent of the Internet has ‘*had a dramatic effect on social life*’ (p. 3). The claims proposed by McLuhan and Wysocki are indeed true, as virtual participatory culture is omnipresent and increasingly growing. Technological developments have fuelled a rise in the usage of and participation in online communication tools, such as social media platforms and virtual communities. Such tools have revolutionised the way in which individuals communicate and spend their leisure time. The Internet has become a meeting place where individuals are brought together with others who share the same hobbies and interests.

As online gatherings (such as virtual communities) have become an integral part of life for hundreds of millions of people, participation involves online dialogue, rituals and activities. Computer-mediated gatherings allow networks of users to form and are sustained through ongoing communication, supporting existing social networks

and creating new ones. Thus, individuals are able to fulfil social desires through participating in communal practices.

The potential commercial usage of online network platforms is recognised by marketing and brand managers, as they direct marketing efforts towards building and maintaining relationships with consumers online. In recent years, virtual communities have become socially and commercially orientated, hosting connections consisting of consumer-to-consumer, business-to-consumer and business-to-business interactions. From a marketing perspective, the interaction between consumers in virtual communities relating to a brand, consumption activity or product is particularly insightful.

As complex webs of consumers and organisations are created through a shared communal interest in an idea, product, service or brand, online participation progresses from initially asocial information-gathering to increasingly affiliative social activities, where groups are formed *'based upon a shared enthusiasm for, and knowledge of, a specific consumption activity or related group of activities'* (Kozinets, 1999, p. 254). The pattern of relationship development in virtual consumption communities has been linked to the acquisition of knowledge relating to a specific brand, product or activity.

The varying levels of engagement and participation of virtual-community members, along with the range of communal roles and positions (e.g. moderators and gatekeepers), encourage different types of interaction and add to the complexity of such online networks. In this regard, the study will look to understand how and why individuals are given certain communal positions and roles and whether there is a

connection with levels of participation. Virtual communities, such as those orientated towards a consumption activity or brand, have become important reference groups consisting of opinion leaders and mavens. Virtual communities are of particular importance to marketing practitioners because the dialogue occurring amongst members can be particularly influential on buying behaviours. Understanding the dynamics of these consumption-orientated communities has obvious benefits for marketing practitioners, as they offer insights into behaviours, trends and motives.

Virtual communities are characterised by low entry and exit barriers, where members are able to join, participate and leave online discussions with relatively little difficulty. An inherent aspect of communities is the tensions and rivalries between members. By focusing on cooperative behaviours and conflicts, a holistic view of virtual communities is offered. Thus, the study will explore network development by focusing on the elements of interaction, such as collaborative activities, as well as the rivalries.

The concepts, models and theories developed by the Industrial Marketing and Purchasing (IMP) Group provide valuable insights into networks. Although primarily in a business-to-business context, the vast body of research from the IMP Group has studied complex webs of interactions such as networks. Research by the IMP Group has made significant contributions to understanding networks by examining the processes and elements of interactions; such as cooperation, and conflict, and network structure, position and dynamics. The central question driving IMP research is 'how do networks develop and evolve?' By drawing from aspects of IMP research, our understanding of how networks of members participating in a virtual community will be developed.

Despite the prevalence of research into virtual communities in the areas of communication, information systems, marketing and consumer behaviour, our knowledge on the interaction processes that occur amongst communal members and the development of member networks is limited. Existing research into networks has focused on those in a traditional setting such as the offline environment. Utilising IMP concepts such as the interaction approach, where the focus is on understanding dyadic relationships and the network approach where attention is paid to complex webs of relationships, the application of IMP research will be extended to a virtual environment.

1.2 Research Objectives

The focus of the study primarily lies in taking a holistic view in understanding how networks in a consumption community are established and maintained. This primary research objective is centred upon exploring networks in a consumption community by focusing on:

- the characteristics of the community;
- a member's role, involvement and participation in the community; and
- the interaction between communal members such as consumers, brands and organisations and their activities.

1.3 Organisation of the Thesis

The thesis consists of ten main chapters (see illustration 1.1). Each chapter begins with an introduction that states its objectives and structure of the chapter, and finishes with a summary that highlights the main issues and findings.

Chapter two provides the context of the study. This chapter considers the wide-ranging views on what constitutes a virtual community, and the characteristics associated with consumption communities. The chapter also discusses the different types of participants and communicators.

Chapter three reviews the literature that provides the theoretical underpinnings of the study. The literature review draws on marketing, consumer research and communication studies and concludes by reviewing the appropriateness of concepts from the IMP Group when studying the development of virtual networks.

Chapter four discusses the research philosophy and research approach (netnography, also known as an online ethnography) employed throughout the data-collection process. Chapter five outlines the data-collection process, and the data analysis and interpretation strategy.

The analysis and findings are organised into three chapters: (1) the characteristics and structure of the virtual community, (2) the community's heterogeneous members, focusing specifically on their interaction and participations in the community, and (3) issues concerning consumption, power and status. In light of the analysis and findings, chapter nine provides a discussion of the theoretical contributions of the study.

Chapter ten is the concluding chapter, which identifies the theoretical contributions of the study and its practical implications, along with the limitations and avenues for further research.

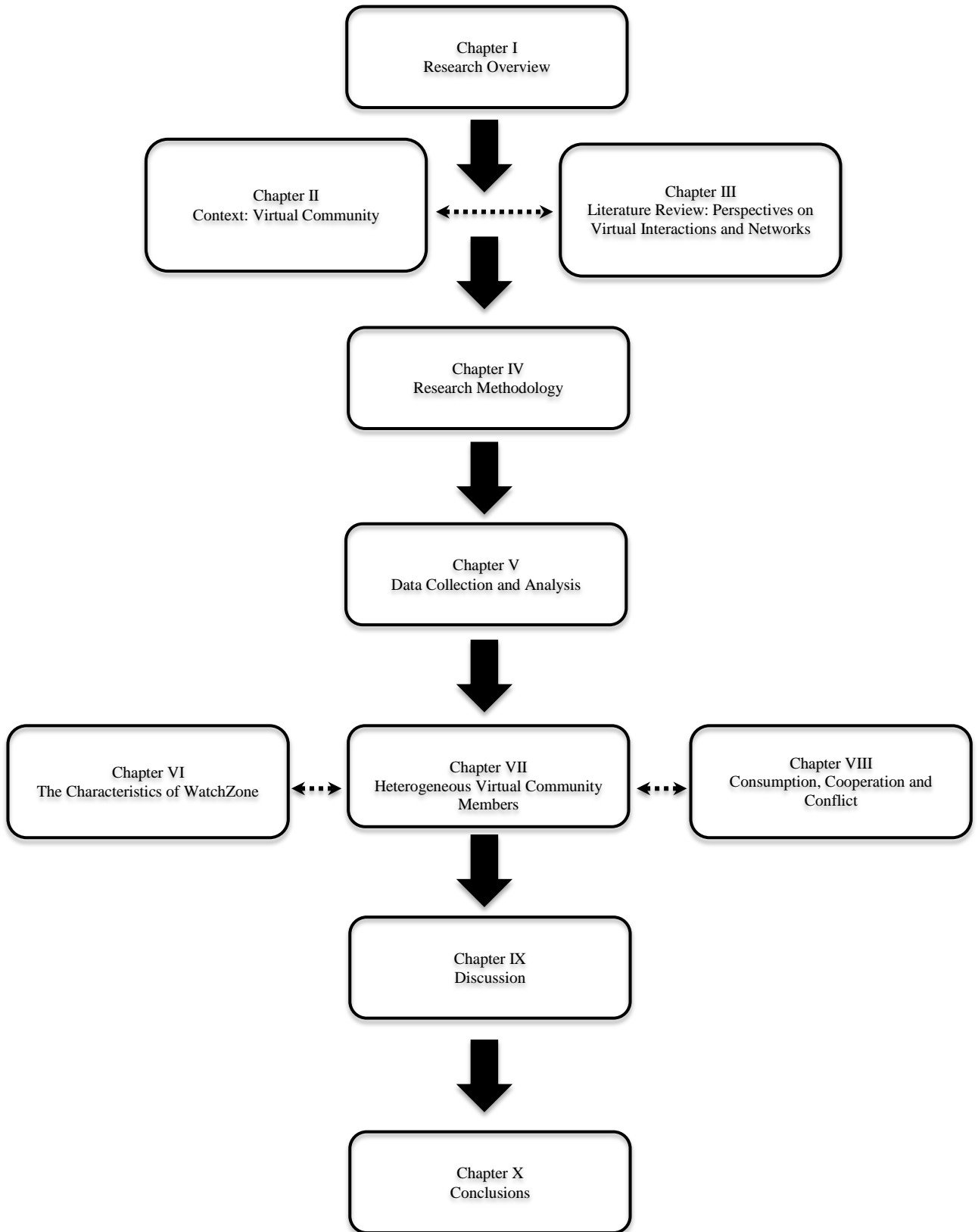


Illustration 1.1 Structure of the Thesis.

Chapter II

Context: The Virtual Community

2.1 Introduction

This chapter provides the contextual background of the study. The phenomenon of the virtual community is by no means a new development, with scholars across research disciplines studying these online gatherings for the past two decades.

Traditionally, communities were clans, families, and churches, which were built upon strong ties and reciprocity. For Hercheui (2010), the term community is related to *'ideas of kinship and geographical proximity'* (p. 1). Thus, communities are associated with a specific geographical location, which leads to a sense of belonging and shared understanding for its members. Such communities offer a sense of belonging and kinship, whilst being hierarchically structured.

Virtual communities have been found to offer an online space where *'people carry on public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships'* (Rheingold 1993, p. 5). Free from geographical barriers, virtual communities allow users to utilise networked computers to form and sustain communities through ongoing communication (Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2002; Hung and Li, 2007). Rheingold (1993) captures the essence of the virtual community in a way that is as relevant today as it was in 1993. He describes and explains the activities that members engaged in as follows:

In cyberspace, we chat and argue, engage in intellectual discourse, perform acts of commerce, exchange knowledge, share emotional support, play games

and metagames, flirt... We do everything people do when people get together, but we do it with words on computer screens, leaving our bodies behind (p. 58).

Despite the obvious differences between traditional and virtual communities, Bagozzi and Dholakia (2002) recognise that traditional 'bounded' communities involve imposed membership, whilst membership of virtual communities is based on 'volitional choice': a member can terminate membership conveniently or never enter the virtual community. Thus, the low entry and exit barriers enable the effortless termination of virtual-community membership. However, there is growing evidence that participation is also immersive and prolonged as the virtual communities are not based proximity but rather enable users to congregate in an online space (Kozinets, 1999; Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2002; de Valck, 2007).

2.2 Virtual Community Characteristics

While research has generally revealed that many virtual communities follow the same basic rules and procedures as groups that gather offline (Hagel and Armstrong, 1997; Lazar and Preece, 1998), each differ in their structure, scale and state. A common trait held by virtual communities is the development of group norms and group identity, similar to those developed by face-to-face communities. Academics generally agree that virtual communities consist of the following characteristics:

- Membership, boundaries, belonging and group symbols (Baym, 1995; Herring, 1996; Curtis, 1997; Greer, 2000).
- Enforcing and challenging norms (Markus, 1994; Baym, 1997).

- Exchange of support amongst members (Rheingold, 1993; Baym, 1997; Kozinets, 1999).
- Shared emotional connections amongst members (Rheingold, 1993; Greer, 2000).

The above characteristics are not only the most widely accepted, but also could be applied to a traditional community (Blanchard and Markus, 2002). As with offline gatherings, ‘the sense of community’ created through participation is an essential characteristic of virtual communities. This sense of community is characterised by feelings of belonging to and identifying with others in the group, in which members have an influence on, or are influenced by, other community members (McMillan and George, 1986). However, Jones (1997) has taken an alternative approach to understanding the unique characteristics of virtual communities by paying specific attention to the set of member behaviours. For Jones (1997) in order for virtual communities to function; a minimum level of interactivity and sustained membership, along with a variety of communicators is required. While these factors are present in many forms of computer-mediated communication platforms, collectively they assist to distinguish virtual communities from other platforms.

While there are some differences and debates surrounding the characteristics and qualities of virtual communities, there are also synergies as virtual communities are considered as an aggregation of individuals or organisations who interact around a shared interest, where the interaction is at least partially supported and mediated by technology, that are guided by some protocols and norms. This perspective embraces many of the key components of virtual community research (see Preece, 2000).

2.3 The Complexities of Virtual Community Research

Research into virtual communities spans many disciplines such as sociology, consumer behaviour and communication research, reflecting the popularity of using such new technologies to fulfil both social and economic goals. The literature is somewhat fragmented as researchers across fields have attempted to categorise virtual communities based on a various variables often with a focus towards to their own discipline.

2.3.1 Homogeneous Virtual Communities

The notion of a biased view of virtual communities is evident amongst management studies researchers (e.g Krishnamurthy, 2003), where communities are distinguished by purpose and business objectives such as revenue generation (Brown *et al.*, 2002) or more effective product support and service delivery (Walden, 2000). Early research into virtual communities has tended to focus on single variables such as the seminal work offered by Hagel and Armstrong (1996). While Hagel and Armstrong (1996) provide insightful details of different types of communities based upon fantasy, interest, transaction and relationship (see table 2.1).

Table 2.1 Classification based on Virtual Community Orientation.

Armstrong and Hagel's Classification	Orientation	Objective of the Virtual Community
Fantasy	Pure virtual community, operating only online	Enjoyment
Interest	Pure virtual community, operating only online	Information/knowledge-sharing or enjoyment
Transaction	Online, commercially orientated	Sales, auction or information/knowledge-sharing
Relationship	Online, socially or commercially orientated	Relationship-building, customer service, relationship marketing, information/knowledge-sharing or enjoying

The classification of virtual communities presents a series of simple communities where members can buy, sell and learn more about products and services, thus communities facilitate the buying and selling of products and services (i.e communities of transaction). Unlike communities of relationships, where members develop and form social relations around certain life experiences (Gupta and Kim (2004), communities of transaction are not based on social exchange; rather, interactions are based on specific transactions. Hagel and Armstrong (1996) categorise users of fantasy communities as those who take on new avatars, while interactions regarding a specific topic or shared hobby occur in communities of interests.

This focus on homogeneous virtual communities is not restricted to Hagel and Armstrong's (1996) work, but is also apparent in studies from field of information systems. Stanoevska- Slabeva (2002) categorize virtual communities based upon their supporting communication technologies such as chat rooms and bulletin boards.

This simplistic approach is also adopted by Kozinets (1999) who takes an e-marketing perspective to understanding consumption communities. By focusing on different supporting communication technologies, Kozinets (1999) presented five virtual community structures (see illustration 2.1).

		Social Structure	
		Loose	High
Group Focus	Information Exchange	Boards Web Pages	Email Lists
	Social Interaction	Chat Rooms	Playspaces

Illustration 2.1 Types of Community Structures. Source: Kozinets (1999).

Kozinets (1999) posits that virtual communities consist of a single type of structure such as chat-rooms where private communication occurs in real time, or highly interactive boards that are organised around specific products or services, or playspaces that are considered as socially-occurring communication structured around role- and game-playing. While email lists are classified as groups of participants who collectively produce and share information about a particular topic of mutual interest (Kozinets, 2008), and community web pages linked together by a specific interest that facilitate consumer-to-consumer opinions.

While Kozinets (1998, 2008) makes significant contributions when reviewing the important marketing implications of virtual communities structures, this simplistic

lens does not considered the to be diverse structures that can exist simultaneously within a single virtual community. Furthermore, despite the descriptive power of this perspective, it fails to offer insights into how webs of members develop.

Moving away from homogeneous communities that consist of one focus (i.e relationship, transaction, interest or fantasy) or a single communication structure, academics have analysed levels of interactivity within communal settings. The focus virtual community interactions has uncovered participants vary in terms of motivations for joining the community (McLaughlin *et al.*, 1995). Such research has uncovered that communities like their offline counterparts consist of various participants/ communicators (Jones, 1997; Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2002).

Participants are each associated with a different level of involvement, as they may engage in some of the following activities: seeking information, asking for advice, responding to questions, offering advice, monitoring discussions, adhering to community rules, unobtrusive behaviour, and developing social relations (Wellman and Gulia, 1999). A common perspective taken across many disciplines studying virtual communities is the focus on individuals and consumers as members. Researchers from psychology, marketing and management have studied the roles and practices constructed by individuals in the community, in order to understand the communal norms and traditions (Wellman, 2001; Cherny, 1999). Similarly, social psychology research has revealed that individuals have a need to belong and be affiliated with others (Watson and Johnson, 1972); thus, joining a group provides a source of information and assists with achieving social goals (Hogg, 1996). With Wellman *et al.*, (1996) asserting that the motivation to join a community is clearly

reflected in the individual's online behaviours such as the interactions with other communal members.

Much of the research into communities has studied the behaviours of individuals, yet the majority of work on relationship marketing is in a business-to-business relationship context (see Morgan and Hunt, 1994). This gives credence to the idea that networks of multi-organisation and consumer relationships that are mediated by the Internet may also reveal the complexities of virtual communities.

It is clear that existing research has offered descriptive explanations of members based on two dimensions: (1) their level of commitment and interest and (2) the level of expertise on the consumption activity, brand, or product. Furthermore, research has investigated how the role of each member type, such as novices, experts, insiders, devotees and lurkers, differs (Kozinets, 1999; Thomas *et al.*, 2013). However, existing research portrays an oversimplified perspective on the heterogeneous nature of members. Academics such as Schouten and McAlexander (1995) have called for a closer investigation into wide-ranging types of members and their communal activities. Whilst previous research into members' participation and interaction does not reveal the complex and varied nature of communities, neither has research explored how networks of members are maintained and sustained in complex communities.

2.3.2 Complex Virtual Communities

There has been a large body of work by marketing and consumer researchers into communities over the past 20 years, with a large proportion focusing on online and hybrid (based online and offline) consumption related communities. Work by

marketing and consumer researchers has begun to reveal the complexities and nuances of communities, particularly amongst groups of consumers who self-select into a cluster that possesses a common interest in or commitment to a product, brand, consumption activity or consumer-based ideology (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995; Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001; Cova and Cova, 2002).

The focus of a consumption-orientated community has often been centred upon a single topic such as a brand, activity or product. Research has uncovered rich and insightful accounts of community practices and activities that occur when consumers are gathered around a single focus such as the Harley Davidson motorcycle bikers (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995), or ethnographic research conducted into X-Files fandom behaviour (Kozinets, 2001). Although research has limited consideration for consumers participate in communities that consist of an ideology towards for instance a way of life, multiple-brands and various producers.

As research into virtual communities has become more advanced as academics have explored the attractiveness of the community for individuals. The range of appeal has tended to focus on two extremes such as virtual communities that either oppose mainstream ideologies or work with a particular brand/producer. Work by Giesler and Pohlmann (2003) has found that some groups oppose mainstream ideologies and values, such as the common practice of online file sharing (Giesler and Pohlmann, 2003). In contrast to other types of collectives that are aligned with mainstream society, for instance the Harley Davidson motorbike enthusiasts (Schouten and McAlexander 1995). Work exploring communities that possess either opposing or aligned marketplace ideologies offer culturally rich insights and the power of consumers as co-producers, yet fails to consider the multifaceted nature of

communities. Similar to its offline counterparts, virtual communities may also consist of microcultures where within a single community certain member groups work with a brand, while at the same time others oppose and rebel against the brand.

A central premise of virtual communities is the sense of belonging and affiliation that emerges as a result of communal participation. The ease of access and joining a community is conceptualised on entry barriers relating to membership and the degree to which the community encourages and allows for membership growth (Thomas *et al.*, 2013). Such conceptualisations relating to community access provides rigid communal boundaries between members and non-members. A narrow view of access and formal membership to a virtual community can overlook the numerous opportunities to engage and collaborate in activities, and the in groups and out groups that make up the various networks within a single community.

2.4 Gap in Virtual Community Knowledge

The large body of research into virtual communities reflects both the rapid rise in consumer participation and increased interest in the marketing implications of these online gatherings. The power and influence of the interactions occurring in virtual communities is evident across studies as consumers engage in discussion, influencing one another through the dissemination of consumption related knowledge.

The current prevailing view overlooks many of the complexities surrounding virtual communities by emphasising their homogeneity. Examples of homogeneity in virtual community research include the focus on single variable perspectives found within information systems, sociology and management research. Building upon this work, academics have taken a rounded and holistic perspective on communities, such as

interdisciplinary work that draws up on sociological, psychological, and anthropological perspectives, categorizing virtual communities as types of societies (see Komito, 1998; Rafaeli and Sudawweeks, 1997). However such research does not explore the diversity that exists within consumption orientated communities. The focus on the heterogeneity within a community will uncover the diverse meanings members attach to communal rituals and practices.

Scholars researching consumption communities focused upon a product, activity or brand have begun to examine the complex nature of consumer behaviour in communal settings. However a review of the work on virtual community characteristics tends to focus on extreme settings such as communities are either localised or dispersed, possess a broad or narrow appeal that are formed for a short or long time frame, or consist of opposing or aligned ideologies with the marketplace (i.e the brand or producer). By studying the nuances associated within a single community, and the diversity in terms of membership, appeal and temporal differences a more holistic perspective is offered. Existing research particularly within consumer research has tended to explore communities focused on a single product, activity or brand, however many communities encompass all three variables.

2.5 Summary

In summary, research has embraced the growth in interest and participation in virtual communities by studying these online venues from a range of perspectives. A dominant view is the focus on a single variable or issue within the community such as explorations into single-structured communication platforms, or investigations into rigid communal boundaries or single types of exchange such as fantasy, transaction or relationship. However research on virtual communities has yet to

embrace and enhance understanding of how the characteristics of virtual communities influence the network of members. This drives the first research question: ‘how do the characteristics of a virtual community influence the network of members and their behaviours?’

Whilst virtual consumption communities are diverse and dynamic in their characteristics and dimensions, they also consist of complex members. Existing research points to two dimensions of member differentiation: (1) their level of interest and commitment, and (2) their level of expertise and knowledge of the brand, consumption activity, or product. However, this perspective of members is oversimplified and does not consider the complexities of interaction and participation. This leads us to the second research question: ‘how do the complexities of virtual-community members’ (i.e., consumers’ and producers’) involvement, position and role influence their interactions with other members?’

Chapter III

Perspectives on Virtual Interaction and Networks

3.1 Introduction

As computer-mediated communication tools become a significant '*conduit of social life and work*' (Rheingold, 1997, p. 384), many perspectives on virtual interaction have formed across disciplines. This chapter reviews the literature of online marketing (e.g. Hoffman and Novak, 1996; Dutta and Segev, 1999; Evans and Wurster, 2000), communication research (i.e. Walther, 1995; Donath and Boyd, 2004) and consumer research (i.e. Kozinets, 2002; Cova and Cova, 1997; Schouten and McAlexander, 1995).

3.2 Online Marketing and Virtual Interactions

Advances in technology have meant that computer-based communication is much more dynamic than traditional forms of communication. From an online-marketing perspective, virtual communities have become important reference groups and an integral part of decision-making. Members of virtual communities often become part of a complex web of relationships in which individuals seek, express and disseminate knowledge with others (Brown *et al.*, 2007). Scholars of online marketing have long predicted a shift in power from the marketer to the consumer, suggesting a new form of consumer–firm relationship (Bakos, 1991; Levine *et al.*, 2000; Shipman, 2001; Deighton and Kornfeld, 2009). With the introduction of the Internet for commercial purposes, consumers have acquired access to vast amounts of information, whilst developing opportunities to influence their own lives, organisations and others.

Hoffman and Novak (1996) developed the conceptual foundations of marketing practice in the computer-mediated environment. The Internet is considered to have a unique many-to-many communication model; through this platform organisations and consumers provide and access information as well as communicate. Hoffman and Novak (1996) asserted that *'the consumer is an active participant in an interactive exercise of multiple feedback loops and highly immediate communication'* (p. 66). In present-day reality, rather than being mere recipients of information, consumers have embraced the Internet by increasingly interacting with others, such as organisations and other consumers. Computer-mediated communication is used to influence people's attitudes and behaviours, but what is more, it is used *'to inform people, to seek information, to exert control over people, to befriend or seduce people, to entertain and please people'* (Thurlow *et al.*, 2004, p. 18).

Strangelove (1990) states that the *'internet is not about technology, it is not about information, it is about communication'* (p. 369), as individuals interact with one another and exchange emails. As individuals actively engage in the interactive virtual environment, the relationship is not merely between sender and receiver, but also with the computer-mediated environment that is created and experienced by participants (Hoffman and Novak, 1996). However, this is not a view held by all researchers of online marketing. O'Sullivan (2000) argues that computer-mediated communication does not offer anything different from existing forms of communication:

From a functional perspective, it appears new technologies may be providing nothing terribly new – just new ways of doing things that people have been doing throughout the history of social interaction (p. 428).

Other researchers of the Internet have explored its capability for relationship development (Dutta and Segev, 1999). It has altered relationships in two key technological dimensions:

- 1) Interactivity: the real-time nature of the Internet has made relationships more interactive. Dutta and Segev (1999) argue that online relationships have become richer and more intense due to technological advancements.
- 2) Connectivity: the nature of the Internet fosters co-creation and coordination and stimulates greater levels of communication.

Evans and Wurster (2000) argue that the Internet allows for reach, richness and affiliation: the technology has enabled the creation of interactive relationships on a much broader scale and allows relationships to be sustained without the need for face-to-face interaction (Dutta and Segev, 2001). The interactive potential of the Internet has sparked interest from marketing practitioners who want to capitalise on its relationship-building potential (Arnott and Bridgewater, 2002).

The interactive potential as networks of consumers form is recognised by Labrecque *et al.* (2013), who consider them as a power source. The dialogue that occurs between consumers in an online context has the power to influence consumption decisions through recommendations (Keltner *et al.*, 2003; Rucker *et al.*, 2011). The virtual environment has granted consumers access to consumption-related information, such as product or service information from independent reviewers and rating agencies, and private product reviews in the form of electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) (Hennig-Thurau, 2004). The data available through product reviews, comparative product specifications and prices enables consumers to better match

their preferences, demonstrating that the Internet has clearly empowered consumers and reduced the information asymmetry between marketers and consumers.

Research from an online marketing perspective has focused on the potential and capability of the Internet as a tool to facilitate interactions between consumers and communication from businesses to consumers. The many-to-many communication model of the Internet is recognised as a unique and interactive tool (Hoffman and Novak, 1996). Online-marketing research into virtual interaction recognises the Internet's potential for commercial purposes, such as its role as a selling platform. However, the way in which relationships and networks of consumers and organisations develop within a virtual context has been neglected within online-marketing research. Furthermore, there is limited knowledge of how power is gained in virtual communities that consist of networks of consumers, and how status is perceived amongst members. Online-marketing research into virtual communities does not reveal how members acquire communal positions, such as governing a virtual network, and how members become influential in the community.

3.3 Communication Research and Virtual Interaction

Communication research during the Internet's early years argued that it was a poor foundation for social and cultural activities. Academics studying communication measured the richness of different platforms; this richness was based on bandwidth and the amount of contextual cues available (Daft and Lengel, 1986). In person (i.e. face-to-face) exchange has the most cues and is therefore richer than online channels of communication, which was viewed as lean and equivocal. Online communicators suffered from low social presence because of the platform's reduced capacity to

transmit non-verbal cues through body language, resulting in an exchange of impersonal messages (Short *et al.*, 1976). According to early communication research that considered the virtual environment, this environment was ‘impersonal’, with the functionality for task-orientated communication only, and interactions were cold and unsociable (Rice, 1984; Rice and Love, 1987).

Studies in the field of communication research have revealed that the developments in technology have led to the development of interactions that occur via email and specialist networks, creating new and enhanced social relations with others (Baym, 1995). Woolgar (2002) asserts that internet-based communication is playing an increasingly important part in our lives for work and social purposes, where it is enhancing or replacing many of the interpersonal and group interactions occurring in person. Trends have shown that interactions that regularly shift between both modes (online and in person) assist with strengthening links (Donath and Boyd, 2004). Similarly, Boneva *et al.* (2001) found that relationships transferred from the Internet to offline: individuals reported increased contact with distant friends and family due to the Internet.

Computer-mediated communication usage is rapidly increasing as users are liberated from geographical ties. Graddol (1989) notes that online interactions are not constrained formalised ‘*packets of information*’; rather, they are often very social and highly interactive forms of communication. For instance, there are various virtual communities on different social media platforms, each targeted at diverse audiences, catering for specific interests, cultures and activities. de Valck *et al.* (2009) recognise that each of these online gatherings are ‘*specialized consumer knowledge reservoirs*’ (p. 185), where users often establish relationships through participation.

Technological as well as social changes have meant there are many new methods of communicating through the Internet. These new technologies facilitate interaction and provide places in cyberspace for individuals to 'hang out', socialise, participate in information exchange, and communicate in specialist contexts (Hardy, 2002). The Internet is viewed as a social space because it is created by people; therefore, as the *'new public space it conjoins the traditional mythic narrative of progress with strong modern impulse towards self-fulfilment and personal development'* (Jones, 1997, p. 13).

In Walther's (1995) 'Relational Aspects of Computer-Mediated Communication: Experimental Observations Over Time', he asserts that cyberspace uses develop from initially asocial information-gathering to increasingly affiliative communal activities. Ramirez *et al.* (2002) note that individuals begin by employing information-seeking strategies by browsing information unobtrusively (lurking behaviour). As they gradually become more experienced in using the Internet, they may visit sites containing third-party information. Then they may begin to contribute to in-group discussions and post questions about the consumption interest; at this stage a relationship may emerge.

Interactivity is viewed as a key success factor and an essential part of a virtual community's ability to fulfil the needs of its members (Rafaeli and Sudawoods, 1997; Varik and Oostendorp, 2013). The communication that takes place when members respond to each other's messages, answer questions and reply to enquiries is essential, as the virtual community might be abandoned if members feel ignored or ostracised (Williams *et al.*, 2000). According to Markus (1987), members will invest more time and energy in the community if they receive helpful responses through

their online interactions with others. Joyce and Kraut (2006) support the notion that members will return to the community if they receive responses to their questions. These virtual interactions have been linked to information-seeking, as individuals use computer-mediated communication tools to acquire knowledge (Ramirez *et al.*, 2002).

Information-seeking strategies also constitute virtual interaction, as this behaviour arises as a consequence of a need perceived by the information-seeker, who, in order to satisfy these needs, calls upon information sources or services in order to gain the relevant information (Wilson, 1999). Academics within communication research view information-seeking behaviour as a '*conscious effort to acquire information in response to a need or gap in your knowledge*' (Case, 2007). According to Ramirez and his colleagues (2002), information-seeking strategies assist with developing interpersonal relationships whilst reducing uncertainty for the information-seeker.

Berger (1979) proposes passive, active and interactive information-seeking behaviours, whilst Ramirez *et al.* (2002) have applied these strategies to the computer-mediated environment. A passive information-seeker uses non-interactive methods, as the 'lurker' gathers information without affecting the behaviour of others. At the other end of the scale of directness, an interactive strategy involves obtrusive information-seeking, where the individual engages in proactive efforts to gain knowledge (Ramirez *et al.*, 2002). In this line of thinking, virtual interactions are closely linked to the individual's pursuit of information; however, little is known about the interactions between individuals and their influence on which information-seeking strategy is utilised.

Researchers in the communication domain have uncovered many valuable insights into the interaction and participation involved in virtual communication. Wellman and Gulia (1999) have studied members' attraction to such communities, whilst Constant *et al.* (1996) have examined the strength of ties and links between members. Weak ties, such as relationships with online acquaintances, have been found to be particularly useful when seeking help and advice to solve problems (Constant *et al.*, 1996).

Postmes *et al.* (1998) have explored group dynamics and the formation of group norms. Informed by network analysis, Postmes *et al.* (1998) argue that the content and form of communication defines the communication patterns within the group, and conformity to group norms increases over time. Over the course of interaction via computer-mediated communication, the social identities of group members become salient.

Many researchers point to the role of communication tools, such as virtual communities, in facilitating interactions and exchange (Walther, 1995; Postmes *et al.*, 1998), where barriers such as limited non-verbal cues and geographical distance are overcome. Researchers of computer-mediated communication have focused on the importance of interactivity in virtual communities (Markus, 1987; Rafaeli and Sudweeks, 1997), with some exploration into the progression of virtual interactions into social relationships with others (Walther, 1995).

Walther (1995) has made some attempts to understand the development of relationships between users, although this body of research has not explored what types of interaction are required for long-term relations and how networks of users

form through the use of different types of computer-mediated communication tools. Furthermore, researchers have neglected to investigate how different types of communicators interact and use computer-mediated communication tools. Not all communicators and users of online communication platforms will have the same needs and motivations; therefore, the types of interactions a user engages in may also differ. An area of research that remains underdeveloped is how different online communication tools encourage diverse types of interactions. For instance, existing research would suggest that different computer-mediated communication tools, such as virtual communities and social media platforms, encourage users to use different types of information-seeking strategies.

3.4 Consumer Research and Virtual Interaction

The notion that communal consumption leads to the development of relationships, interpersonal bonds, and links between members is not new at all. Across consumption collectives (online and offline), members have been found to place emphasis on a certain type of consumption (e.g. products, services or brands) as part of a ritual and tradition (Celsi *et al.*, 1993; McAlexander and Schouten, 1998; Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001). Yet communal consumption where members are not physically in proximity to one another and interact virtually creates a fertile environment for relationships to be sustained and maintained.

Consumer research has traditionally neglected the subject of community, as individual cognition, traits and consumption have been the key focus. Boorstin (1973) describes consumption communities as *'invisible new communities [...] created and preserved by how and what men consumed'* (p. 89). Arnould and Price

(1993) offer the notion of ‘communitas’, as a sense of communion emerged amongst participants, who had *‘feelings of linkage, of belonging, of group devotion to a transcendent goal’* (p. 34). Goodwin (1994) introduced the concept of communality when exploring traditional service areas, such as town squares and pubs played social support roles and were perceived as places for urban tribes to enact rituals. Fischer *et al.* (1996) put forward the idea of community as something that is vital to the human phenomenon and that must be consciously preserved, promoted or protected in the contemporary world.

The vast body of research on consumption community and interaction has led to the identification of three distinctive community concepts. Canniford and Shankar (2011) identify subcultures of consumption, brand communities and consumer tribes as unique in terms of their characteristics and their forms. Researchers of each type of community have discussed the interaction between members as a result of communal activities and practices. However, the research has led to differing perspectives when exploring how virtual interactions lead to the development of relationships and networks. Each consumption community takes a different stance and perspective on the interactions that occur between members. A view held by many researchers of consumer behaviour is that the interactions that occur within online consumption collectives underpin the formation of bonds, links and ties between members. Literature relating to the interactions amongst members within the three types of collectives will now be reviewed.

3.4.1 Subcultures of Consumption

According to Goulding *et al.* (2002), early theories of subculture involved communities that established strong interpersonal bonds, rituals, and beliefs through

social affiliations that overcome institutions such as social class and schooling. Within consumer research, subcultural communities are grounded in the '*shared commitment to a particular product class, brand or consumption activity*' (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995, p. 43). These consumption communities are characterised by members who choose to be members of groups that are held together by temporary experiences and consumption activities (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995; Belk and Costa, 1998; Kozinets, 2001).

Virtual communities of consumption are those with a shared interest in communicating information and experiences relating to a particular consumption activity or the consumption of a product or service. These online platforms act as what Clerc (1996) considers to be a social climate, as feelings of belonging and trust as well as group culture and rules are developed. The virtual community is implicitly and explicitly centred on the consumption experience. For instance, members of virtual watch-collector communities share their collecting experiences and upload watch reviews on brand-specific chat forums. For Kozinets (1999), virtual communities of consumption are '*a specific subgroup of virtual communities that explicitly centre upon consumption-related interests*'; they are defined as '*affiliative groups whose online interactions are based upon shared enthusiasm for, and knowledge of, a specific consumption activity or related group of activities*' (p. 254). The online interaction occurring within these groups is often viewed as a form of word of mouth and can have a major influence on purchase intentions as well as purchase evaluations for users.

In the subculture consumption collective involving Harley Davidson motorcycle enthusiasts, research found the significant degree of marginality and outlaw culture

brought members together (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995). Although the Harley Davidson subculture consumption collective was based offline, similar findings are reported online. When studying online subculture consumption collectives based on the television series *Star Trek* and *X-Files*, Kozinets (1997; 2001) found that meaning is created through '*contemporary hunger*'. The virtual interactions centre upon the series, create meanings and sacralise articulations; the mass-media programmes become more than simply a commercial product. The participation in communal activities and consumption of the product provides members with a sense of self.

Within research into online gatherings based on subculture consumption, it is recognised that there are many types of social sites that facilitate interactions between users (Kozinets, 1997). Social sites, such as electronically-based discussion forums, online bulletin boards and blogs, have meant that a rising number of consumers are connecting and interacting with others '*to express and disseminate their knowledge, experiences, and opinions about products and services*' (de Valck *et al.*, 2009, p. 201). These interactions can become a focal part of the functioning of gatherings where the reasons for participation have informational and instrumental value for individual users (Fischer *et al.*, 1996). However, this somewhat shallow view neglects to investigate how the interactions that occur on these social sites lead to relationships forming between community members.

Kozinets (1999) has studied the pattern of relationship development in virtual communities of consumption, and his findings are consistent with a study from the field of communication research by Walther (1995). Over time, as the community is used more frequently, the individual acquires consumption knowledge and understands the community’s cultural norms, specialised language and practices (Kozinets and Handelman, 1998). Thus, online activity advances from searches for consumption-related information to the development of communal relationships (see illustration 3.1).

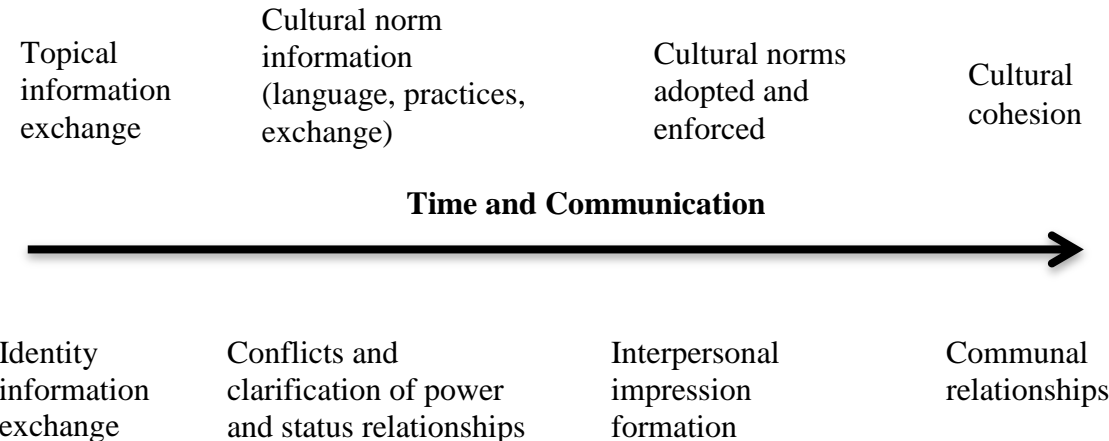


Illustration 3.1 Developmental Progression of Virtual Community Participation. Source: Kozinets (1999).

The interactions within virtual communities of consumption involve sharing and exchanging personal details, stories and opinions (Kozinets, 1999), which assists with cultural cohesion. Gupta and Kim (2004) argue that over time formal and informal relationships develop amongst members. When studying online subculture consumption collectives, social bonds between members are established and sustained through regular communication and a shared interest (de Valck *et al.*,

2007). Consistent with communication research, interactivity between users of the virtual community is essential for its success.

It is recognised that many members of virtual communities consider that the costs of switching to using other virtual communities are too high, as it takes time and energy through interaction with others to become acquainted with the community (Cova *et al.*, 2007). Kozinets (1999) and Walther (1995) consider that the virtual community's environment consists of written and unwritten codes of conduct, norms and values, and that members attempt to create an online reputation and identity through their interactions. As a result of the time and energy invested in a virtual community, members will linger online and participate, despite any differences that might arise (Kozinets, 2001).

According to a study by Fischer *et al.* (1990) in communities and in particular within online communities, relationships formed between members provide a source of emotional support. It is argued that the bond between members may be the result of an experience, idea or thing that community members have in common. These common bonds provide community members with a sense of belonging and shared identity (Arnould and Price, 1993).

Research exploring the interactions between members of subculture collectives, such as virtual communities of consumption, does not reveal how members develop positions of power and status. It is widely acknowledged that over time, through participation in a virtual community, members' understanding of communal norms and values increases (Kozinets, 1999; Arnould and Price, 1993; de Valck *et al.*, 2007). However, research has not explored how communal roles, such as those of a

gatekeeper or moderator, are assigned and how networks of members within the community develop as a result of these interactions.

3.4.2 Brand Communities

Research into brand communities has focused on understanding the '*ties that bind*', highlighting the unifying characteristics of the community (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995; Brown *et al.*, 2003). A brand community consists of a set of social relationships that are created around the use of a focal brand (Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001). Unlike subculture communities, the emphasis shifts away from consumer reactions to alienating social structures, and focuses instead on the interpersonal connections between individuals through the shared use of products and services. The like-mindedness of brand-community members creates a distinction from non-users of the brand (McAlexander and Schouten, 1988; Schau *et al.*, 2009). Brand communities are considered to be an effective platform to promote a brand (McAlexander *et al.*, 2002), offering users deep impressions of a brand's culture and an avenue to collect important information, such as customer opinions about the products or services of the brand (Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001). Muñiz and O'Guinn (2001) identify at least three core components, or markers, of a brand community.

- 1) Consciousness of kind – This is considered to be the most important element of community and refers to the intrinsic connection that community members have with each other, and the collective sense of difference from non-members of the community (Gusfield, 1978). The presence of shared rituals and traditions is disseminated through the community's shared culture, history and consciousness (Douglas and Isherwood, 1978).

- 2) Presence of shared rituals and traditions – Rituals are '*conventions that set up visible public definitions*' (Douglas and Isherwood, 1979, p. 65). Marshall (1994) views traditions as '*sets of social practices which seek to celebrate and inculcate certain behavioural norms and values*' (p. 537).
- 3) A sense of moral responsibility – The third component of community is the moral responsibility or obligation to the community and its members. For Muñiz and O'Guinn (2001), when needed, collective action can be produced.

The characteristics of brand communities as well as the desire to uphold brand values enhance the links between members and firms. As a result, members show affiliation with and commitment towards the brand (Fournier *et al.*, 2001; Brown *et al.*, 2007). Within brand communities, individuals learn brand-related information and the communities' specialist knowledge, cultural norms, rituals and practices, and social interaction develops (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995; Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001). The generation of shared rituals, ways of thinking and the sense of moral responsibility assists with the development of interpersonal bonds between members (Muñiz and Schau, 2005).

The focal brand fosters and supports community ties as individuals feel a sense of belonging. Bender (1978) first used the concept of 'we-ness', which was later used by Muñiz and O'Guinn (2001) in brand communities as they asserted that a shared consciousness was the most important element of community. Later, Muñiz and O'Guinn (2001) applied we-ness when studying brand communities. Their findings showed that members felt a connection to the brand and, more importantly, felt stronger connections with one another. Although researchers have identified the unifying characteristics of brand communities (Kozinets, 2001; Muniz and O'Guinn,

2001; Brown *et al.*, 2003), little attention has been paid to understanding the differences and tensions that emerge within these communities. The emphasis placed on studying the links between members is confined not only to subcultures and brand communities, but also consumer tribes.

3.4.3 Consumer Tribes and Linking Value

Research into consumer tribes is a relatively new concept in marketing, but it has made significant contributions to marketing theory (Cova and Salle, 2008). Tribal involvement is a result of individuals becoming alienated from traditions, even the process of purchasing products and services (Firat *et al.*, 1995). Tribes are viewed as *'any group of people, large or small, who are connected to one another, a leader, an idea'* (Godin, 2008). Tribes are formed around an emotional tie rather than rational behaviours (Cova and Cova, 2002).

Crucially, Cova (1997) states that individuals no longer simply consume products, but rather attach symbolic meanings to them. Thus, the links (social relationships) are viewed as more important than the thing (brands and products). Participation in tribes has been linked to a basic human need to connect with others, share experiences and develop relationships. Because individuals are now able to purchase products without any necessary physical social contact, as the virtual world has resulted in increased isolation, involvement in a tribe is an expression of self-identity (Mitchell and Imrie, 2011). Similarly, Cova and Cova (2002) recognise that involvement in a tribe is considered as an expression of self-identity for individuals who share moral values, opinions and consumption-orientated values and preferences.

Unlike subcultures and compared to the dominant societal culture, consumer tribes consist of connections that are much narrower, with individuals holding similar beliefs and customs (Schiffman *et al.*, 2008). The shared beliefs and passion for a particular consumption activity is the postmodern consumer's vehicle for creating a social link and building bridges between individuals (Cova and Salle, 2008; Simmons, 2008). Consumer tribes provide an opportunity to connect with other consumers; these self-formed groups have meaning and relevance for the individuals within them (Mitchell and Imrie, 2011). The existence of consumer tribes is centred upon the use of symbolism in order to demonstrate an individual's allegiance to the group (Bauman, 1992). For Cova (1997) this symbolic consumption assists with the creation of social links, has social influences on individuals' behaviour and, more specifically, influences their consumption decisions (Bagozzi, 2000).

Cova (1997) offers an alternative view of 'community' through a study of a French in-line roller-skating group. Within this paradigm, the link between tribe members is shown to be more important than the ostensible reason for the link. Tribes seek shared emotion through membership and participation. These groupings are believed to exist in no other form but that symbolically and ritually manifested by member commitment (Cova 1997). In other words, members are emotionally connected by similar consumption values (Mitchell and Imrie, 2011) as the social 'linking value' of a product, service or activity is utilised to build and establish a community.

Tribal marketing shifts the emphasis away from targeting the product or service at a particular consumer or consumer segment, and instead towards focusing on the product or service as a support mechanism that brings together a group of enthusiasts or devotees (Cova, 1997). Bridgewater (2010) has studied football club communities,

which consist of fans who define themselves by a shared passion. Within this context, fans belong to a community that is not defined by where they live, but by which football team they support. These communities are united with like-minded individuals, who form a modern-day tribe. For example, in a football tribe, Bridgewater (2010) found that fans offers:

common purpose, the values, rules, even the outward display of belonging such as team colours, learning communal songs, sharing travel or experiences with others who also belong to the group, replaces the traditional communities and guidelines which society has lost (p. 93).

These socially interconnected groups have been found to act loyally because personal relationships are sustained through shared, regular consumption (Gainer, 1995). It is evident that involvement in a tribe provides postmodern consumers with the opportunity to create links through shared consumption preferences and moral values (Mitchell and Imrie, 2011). From a marketing-practitioner perspective, consumer tribes offer another avenue for creating social interaction between consumers centred upon a product or service (Cova *et al.*, 2007). A criticism of tribal marketing is that the theoretical discussions about how these bonds and links are created between individuals are vague. There is limited discussion on the influence of tribal characteristics on how bonds are formed. Furthermore, research has neglected whether the varying level of a user's involvement in and passion about a consumption practice has an impact on the bonds created with other members.

According to Maffesoli (2007), tribal membership is fluid and fluctuates depending on an individual's involvement, and determines how the individual develops relationships with others. Further research is required into understanding the connections between the importance of the shared activity to an individual (and their

passion about it), the beliefs that the individual holds, and the intensity of the individual's relationships with tribal members. The idea of 'linking value' is conceptually and empirically grounded within tribes (Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001; Cova *et al.*, 2007). There is an opportunity to study linking value in relation to the role that the individual has in a virtual community. More specifically, thinking from tribal research offers fertile ground to explore the influence of virtual community participation on the overall network, as well as the links and connections between members.

It is evident that conflict and tension are inherent in tribes and tribal dynamics (Harrison and Jenkins, 1996; Kozinets, 2001; de Valck, 2007). Tribal members have shown that they interact in a cooperative and competitive manner (de Valck, 2007). Similarly, Hickman and Ward (2007) highlight the inter-rivalries that can exist within consumer communities. Members have shown that 'dark' behaviours, such as inter-group stereotyping, and feelings of jealousy and tension emerge as individuals challenge communal norms. In a study by Algesheimer *et al.* (2005), it was found that engagement and interactions in a tribe can cause normative pressure, where unwelcome feelings of reference-group pressure to conform also arise. However, tribal-marketing research has not shown how interactions develop into positions of power and status within the consumer collective. In order to sustain the consumer community, such as a tribe, members must be able to overcome their differences and tensions; however, it is unclear how core tensions arise and how members overcome them. In order to understand relationship development in online consumer communities, further research is required into the cooperative and darker side of interactions.

3.5 Gaps in the Current Research

Explorations into virtual interactions across online-marketing research, communication studies and consumption collectives has uncovered a complex and varied heterogeneity. Research into online marketing predominately focuses on the commercial uses of the Internet for marketing practitioners. Although online-marketing researchers recognise that the Internet is conceptually different from the offline environment (due to its connective and interactive nature), online relationship development is underexplored. However, communication research specifically exploring the online environment has made attempts to understand the communicative cues that influence dialogue between exchange partners on the Internet. Closer examinations by consumer researchers reveal that members of online gatherings (such as virtual communities) vary in what membership means to them, how they participate in consumption activities and their motivations for participation.

Research driven by studies into brand communities focuses on the relationship between a community and a single individual. Although research into tribes and subcultures of consumption communities recognises the links between a brand or organisation and network of consumers, this body of work focuses on a singular brand or organisation, and fails to explore multiple brands or organisations interacting with community members.

Parallels can be drawn with certain types of consumer behaviour as scholars have uncovered that consumption activities such as hoarding and collecting behaviour are complex, multifaceted and linked to deep psychological motives (Belk *et al.*, 1988). Debates around collecting behaviour have explored whether pursuing collecting

activities are uniformly good or bad form of consumption (Goldberg and Lewis, 1978; Eisenberg, 1987; Belk *et al.*, 1989) as collectors report signs of guilt and other dysfunctional consequences. This consumption activity is conceptualised as an essentially acquisitive and materialistic quest (Danet and Katriel, 1986), the varying levels of interest in collecting where objects within a collection removed from their utilitarian or mundane status (Belk *et al.*, 1988), studying a virtual community centred upon collecting would provide a diverse and complex research setting.

Whilst consumer research acknowledges the diversity and complexity of communities consisting of dynamic interactions and networks, the implications on the network of consumers, producers and activities and communal roles and positions is under-researched. Thus, this leads to the central research question driving this study: ‘How does heterogeneity impact the continuity of the virtual community and the network of members?’

3.6 Network Approach

Outside of online marketing, communication studies and consumer research, the Industrial Marketing and Purchasing (IMP) Group has developed a body of research specifically exploring how networks of varied actors develop in an industrial (business-to-business) setting. Models, concepts and debates derived from 35 years of industrial marketing and purchasing research offer valuable insights into interaction processes, network development and evolution (Cunningham and Roberts, 1979; Håkansson, 1982; Mattson, 1989). Unlike consumer-behaviour research, industrial marketing and purchasing research places equal emphasis on understanding the characteristics of all parties involved in an interaction (Ford,

1995). It is recognised that actors are all active, as opposed to the consumer-based perspective, which considers interactions to involve one passive and one active actor. Researchers adopting the industrial marketing and purchasing view also place emphasis on understanding the surrounding environmental factors that affect interactions (Möller and Wilson, 1995).

The Network Approach has developed from interaction research by the IMP Group. Interaction research typically focused on investigating the interplay between different exchange partners and between the abstract ideas and constraints of the physical world that surrounds these actors (Gadde and Håkansson, 2001). The focus on understanding interactions has led to the emergence of themes; for example, concerning power and dependence and the creation of trust through long-term interactions. In this regard, industrial marketing and purchasing research has explored factors that are often overlooked by other disciplines. Particular emphasis is placed on the following.

- Specific events within a relationship, such as specific exchange episodes and processes.
- The relationship, such as exploring cooperation–conflict and power–dependence imbalances, and strong and fragile relationships.
- Specific motivations and drivers underpinning interaction patterns, behaviours and responses.
- Relevant and matching contact interfaces and interaction patterns between exchange parties.

Network research is concerned with studying the totality of relationships (Easton, 1992; Easton and Araujo, 1992), where each relationship is viewed in terms of the webs of actors (i.e. individuals organisations), resource ties and patterns of activities that extend across numerous actors. These webs of actors, known as networks, can create a range of opportunities and benefits for actors. An alternative to studying networks has been to focus on individual aspects of these complex webs, because these networks are frequently changing and the networks (activity, resources and actors) are overlapping and inter-related (Axelsson, 2010). Researchers from the IMP Group have often chosen to study one aspect of the network; for example, activity (Waluszewski, 1996), the bonds between actors (Liljegren, 1988) or resource ties (Baraldi and Strömsten, 2009).

There are different conclusions about the level at which networks should be studied, as there is a need to gain insight rather than simply describe the complexities. Thus, the network is reduced to the study of a small aspect: a single relationship (Easton and Araujo, 1992) known as the dyad. Other academics, such as Smith and Laage-Hellman (1992) have studied the connection between three exchange partners, known as a triad. There are, of course, limitations to breaking down networks. Firstly, networks are complex and are oversimplified when studying only the single relationships (Bridgewater and Egan, 2002). Secondly, changes in interaction within a network can have a significant impact on other parts of the network, which would not be discovered if single relationships only were studied.

Networks consist of ever-widening patterns of interactions that have a direct or indirect impact on actors, with some interactions occurring independently. There are numerous views of networks within management; however, there are two key strands

of literature within marketing and strategy. The first strand views networks as a type of structure that a firm can choose, and the second views networks as markets that are made up of webs of relationships (Easton and Araujo, 1992) (see illustration 3.2). The networks of relationships forms the basis of the ‘markets as networks’ perspective, in which social structures comprise of bonds between buyer and seller and other relevant exchange partners (Johanson and Mattson, 1992).

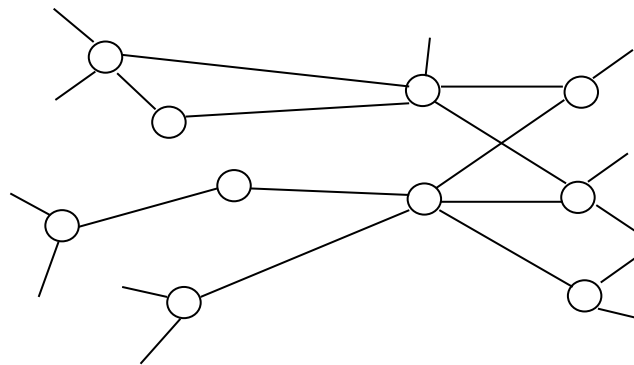


Illustration 3.2 Network Consisting of Multiple Interconnected Actors.

Studying networks of relationships involves exploring the nature and processes of exchange, and the formation and dynamic development processes of relationships. From the Network Approach, the Activities-Resources-Actor (ARA) model emerged, offering an understanding of the complex networks and relationships that exist between them (Håkansson and Snehota, 1995). The Network Approach provides a holistic view on the relationships and behaviours of actors as well as the series of complex interactions that contribute to the maintenance of the network.

3.6.1 Heterogeneous Actors

Previous explorations into actors within networks (such as in communities) focus on two types of heterogeneous actors: producers (i.e. organisations and brands) and consumers. Traditionally, investigations are centred upon a single dimension, such as the differences between experts and novices in terms of their level of commitment, identity or expertise. Rather than taking this oversimplified approach, industrial marketing and purchasing researchers often take a holistic approach to understanding actors in networks by exploring systems of relationships and interactions from the perspective of a particular actor (Gadde *et al.*, 2003; Håkansson *et al.*, 2009). Rather than investigating interactions in isolation, academics have explored the more complex reality of networks (for example, within industrial networks) that consist of individually significant interdependent actors, and understanding the interconnected relationships (Håkansson *et al.*, 2009) (see illustration 3.3).

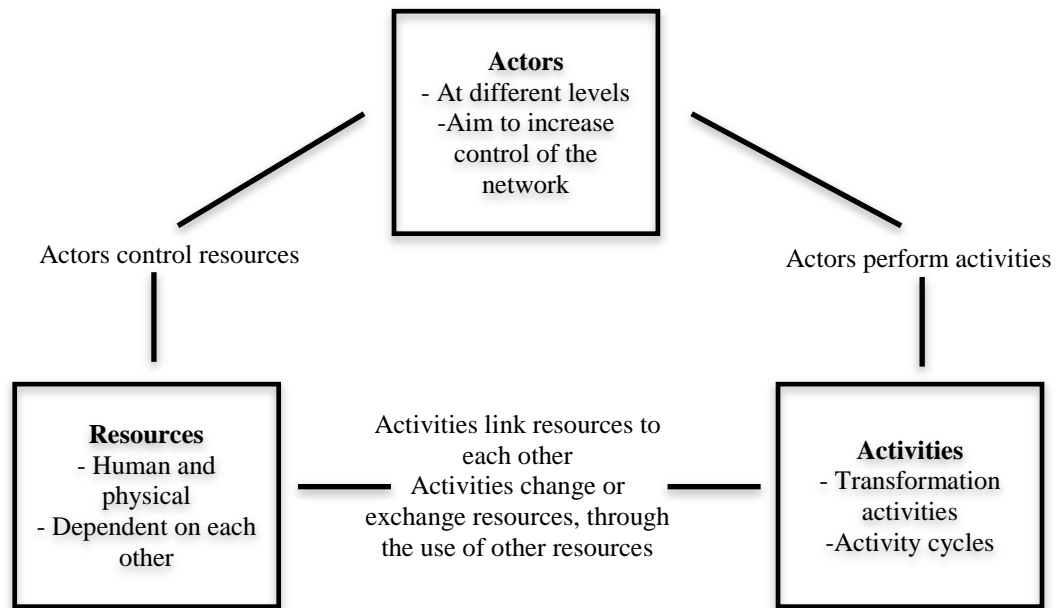


Illustration 3.3 The Relationship between Actors, Activities and Resources (Adapted from Håkansson and Snehota, 1995).

From an industrial marketing and purchasing perspective, an activity can be defined as a pattern of actions that are directed towards a goal or purpose. The activity links constitute interaction processes that explain the formation of relationships and networks (Huemer, 2013). By studying the behaviours and activities of actors in the network, an understanding of the interplay between actors is offered (Huemer, 2013). These activity links comprise of resource exchange, communication, coordination and adaptation processes. Activities conducted by an actor are related to those of other actors. The activity links influence the development of relationships in a business-to-business context; they can also have economic consequences for actors. When considering relationships, the actor's activities are embedded in a broader pattern of activity that builds the foundation of what actors do and how they relate to others (Håkansson, 1982; Turnbull and Valla, 1986; Hallen *et al.*, 1991). Activity links also play a crucial role in understanding how networks are established and

developed, as the different motivations for participation will be reflected in the different activities a member engages in.

Each of the actors conducts activities that use a variety of resources; the interaction takes place through processes of exchange and adaptation (Johanson and Mattsson, 1992). The adaptations that occur might involve mutual modifications based on common goals of the network actors (Fyrberg and Jürriado, 2009). Resources, such as knowledge, production, equipment and energy, influence whether actors become more or less adapted to each other and more or less tied to each other as interaction develops (Ford *et al.*, 2008). The resource ties connect various elements that are needed and controlled by the exchange partners. Examples of resource ties between actors given by Tahtinen and Halinen-Kaila (1997) are technological, material and knowledge ties.

Various tangible and intangible elements may be considered to be resources when use can be made of them. Research suggests that control over resources and better access is a source of advantage (Håkansson and Snehota, 1995). Each actor has a unique set of resources related to the activities performed; thus, showing the inter-relatedness of actor bonds, activities links and resources ties. In their study of networks, Fyrberg and Jürriado (2009) found that actors obtain access to information, through resource ties such as exchange, dependency, competition and coalition.

3.6.2 Cooperation and Conflict

Extensive research from an industrial marketing and purchasing perspective has been conducted to understand how conflict and cooperation is created (Young and Wilkinson, 1997), the determinants of trust (Håkansson, 1982; Wilson and Möller,

1995), how to create long-term stable relationships (Easton, 1992), as well as the types of exchange that occur (Ford, 1992), the characteristics of all actors involved in relationships (Håkansson and Snehota, 1995), and how distance is created in relationships and how this might be overcome (Ford, (1997). Easton (1992) has studied how interaction affects the duration of relationships and the interdependence of actors in networks. Within industrial marketing and purchasing research, interaction is a process between the two exchange parties that develops in a way that is not fully controlled by either of the two parties (Gadde and Hulthén, 2009). Over time, the interaction process has an impact on what and how each actor connects with others, whilst also whilst influencing the actor's own activities and behaviour.

It has been recognised that interaction is influenced by the individual exchange episodes that occur. These exchange episodes, either cooperative or conflictive in nature, determine the length of a relationship, and the expectations of both exchange parties. The atmosphere has a significant impact on the nature of interactions between actors, whilst the characteristics of the actors also play an influential role in how actors engage with others. Industrial marketing and purchasing research has found that the atmosphere is characterised by the power dependence that exists between the exchange parties: more specifically, the state of cooperation and conflict, the overall distance and closeness, and mutual expectations (Ford, 1992).

The behaviours of cooperation and conflict are two essential elements of the maintenance of long-term relationships. Cooperation is viewed as *'all activity undertaken jointly or in collaboration with others which is directed towards common interests or achieving rewards'* (Young and Wilkinson, 1997, p. 55). It is proposed

that cooperation includes sentiments and expectations of future behaviour and behavioural elements (Woo and Ennew, 2004).

Cooperation is viewed as a joint construct and occurs in the relationship-maintenance process, as exchange partners conduct '*focal activities in a cooperative or coordinated way*' (Heide and John, 1990, p. 25). Within the relationship-development model, Dwyer *et al.* (1987) argue that cooperation is an aspect of the initiation and expansion phases. Cooperation should begin at an early stage of relationship development in order to prevent problems and waste of money (Biemans, 1995). Relationships with low competition and high cooperation are often viewed as ideal. These types of relationships are found in mature relations, where the exchange partners are highly committed by personal ties, but not necessarily through social links (Young and Wilkinson, 1997); thus, the relationship is based on an understanding of past interactions.

Traditionally, all conflicts are seen as dysfunctional (Finch *et al.*, 2013). Conflicts involve unhealthy behaviours that consist of distorting information to harm others or interacting with others in a hostile or distrustful manner (Ruekert and Walker, 1987). Conflict can arise when one exchange partner is prepared to offer a higher level of mutuality than the other. Mutuality is considered to be how much one actor is prepared to give up their individual goals to increase the positive outcome for others (Håkansson and Gadde, 1992). Many researchers have found that conflict threatens relationships and, more specifically, the interests and resources of actors (Halinen and Tähtinen, 2002; Håkansson and Waluszewski, 2002). A common view held by academics is that conflict often leads to ending relationships between actors (Vaaland

and Håkansson, 2003). Conflicts are often resolved through identifying goals and understanding the reasons for the divergence of goals (Finch *et al.*, 2013).

In contrast, Salo *et al.* (2009) recognise that some amount of conflict might be necessary in order to keep relationships healthy. The way in which exchange partners use power and communicate with others influences expectations, perceived attraction and trust in the relationship (Wilson and Möller, 1995). Anderson and Narus (1990) recognise that successful relationships do not have to be completely harmonious; rather, relationships can have cooperative and competitive elements. Effective relationships require collaboration as well as an equal amount of conflict (Håkansson and Gadde, 1992).

Understanding cooperative interactions and conflict also has relevance for participation in virtual communities. Håkansson and Gadde (1992) have found that the most desirable relationships are those in which conflict is handled constructively. However, many research questions remain unanswered, specifically relating to cooperative and conflictive interactions. For instance, it is unclear how members experience and make sense of conflict as part of their participation in virtual communities. Members of a virtual community may hold contradictory as well as shared interests; thus, creating an atmosphere of cooperation and competition. As relationships develop through conflicting and cooperative behaviours, trust emerges as a key factor that influences interaction (Dwyer *et al.*, 1987). More broadly, research has neglected to investigate how virtual communities and their members manage conflict.

3.6.3 Network Structure and Dynamics

Observations from network research by the IMP Group show that domino effects exist; that is, the actions and activities of one actor have an impact on others in the network (Ford, 1992; Leek *et al.*, 2003). As the roles of actors change, the dynamics of the network are altered. Andersen (2008) argues that an actor may improve its network position and stay competitive by consistently reshaping its roles when interacting with others.

The concepts of network position, structure and dynamics are inter-related, and it could be argued that networks are bound by trust and power. Academics such as Johanson and Mattsson (1992), Henders (1992) and Anderson *et al.* (1998) have all contributed to the understanding of network position. For Johanson and Mattsson (1992), network position is the measure of the structure of a network, in which ‘each actor is engaged in a number of exchange relationships with other actors’ (p. 211). These relationships are essentially the determinant of an actor’s position in a network. According to Mattsson (1985), network position is viewed in four ways:

- 1) The functions performed by actors
- 2) The relative importance of an actor in the network
- 3) The strength of the actor’s relationships with other actors
- 4) The identity of actors based on their direct relationships with other actors.

As positions are identified for all actors in the network, the concept of network position can be characterised by the network’s structure and dynamics (Salmi *et al.*, 2000). Each actor has a position in a network, and that position is described by their relationships with other actors. Methods used to characterise and measure

relationships in a network in order to understand an actor's position are (1) the intensity of relationships, and (2) the number of relationships.

Henders (1992) found that network position is a dynamic concept and that it is possible to describe changes in an actor's position by comparing the actor's position at certain time points. Changes in network position can be explained by the activities of actors given their position and role in a network (Anderson *et al.*, 1998). Active members might have more central positions in a network and a high density of links with others (Pavlovich, 2003); these actors might be of more benefit to the network than less active actors. Salmi *et al.* (2000) assert that how actors relate to one another and the network has an impact on the process of change; therefore, network position contributes to an actor's capability to affect change processes. Network positions are in constant change as actors engage in activities and alter the demands on resources, which also results in changes to the actors themselves.

As actors evolve and modify their behaviour over time, the network they interact with will also evolve. Understanding the process of evolution and modification of a virtual-community member will uncover the changing dynamics of the virtual network. This, in turn, will impact on the structure of the network and the position an actor holds within the network. Taking an industrial marketing and purchasing perspective will develop understanding of how a member's position in a network impacts on their interactions with others. The idea of whether there is a connection between a member's network position and the orientation of their interactions (cooperative or conflict) has yet to be explored in a virtual-community setting. According to Guercini and Runfola (2012), each actor's position is determined by

expectations and the activities they conduct, which can provide significant insights that can improve our understanding of network dynamism and structure.

3.7 Summary

In summary, traditional research into communities is dominated by the view that homogeneous groups offer many benefits. Extant studies have reflected this by studying single dyadic interactions between homogeneous members. However, IMP Group research provides fresh insights into complex and varied networks. In order to capture the complexity of consumption communities, particularly focusing on an online setting, industrial marketing and purchasing concepts and frameworks will offer understanding of the varied interplay between diverse members. The specific focus on the dynamic associations between consumers and producers (organisations and brands) of communities will uncover how cooperation and tensions contribute to network and continuity of the community.

Thus, the central research question that has emerged from the literature review is: How does heterogeneity impact the continuity of the virtual community and the network of members? The study addresses the following sub-questions:

- How do the characteristics of a virtual community influence the network of members and their behaviours?
- How does the interplay between consumers, producers (organisations or brands) and activities shape the network?
- How do the complexities of virtual-community members' (i.e. consumers' and producers') involvement, position and role influence their interactions with other members?

Chapter IV

Research Methodology

4.1 Introduction

The research methodology is guided by the central aim of the study; that is, to understand how heterogeneity impacts the network of members and the continuity of virtual community.

This chapter begins with discussing the philosophical considerations of the study. It then outlines the chosen methodological approach: netnography, a method that adapts ethnographic research techniques to an online environment. A justification of the research site selection process and criteria in line with ethnographic research is offered.

4.2 Philosophical Considerations

Given that the chosen methodological approach adopted in the study is netnography (an online ethnography), the philosophical stance is situated on a spectrum between relativism and interpretivism. As with the perspectives of positivism and interpretivism, which are no longer seen as necessarily being polarised, relativism and interpretivism need not be polarised; rather, they complement one another. Relativism and interpretivism are both relevant to the study, as the research is neither purely interpretivist nor purely relativist. In line with the netnographic methodological stance, an interpretivist/relativist orientation implies that the researcher is involved in the research context and is concerned with generating and building theories rather than testing them (Burrell and Morgan, 1979).

In recent years, there have been challenges to the perspective that the scientific research approach has predominance over other methods (Belk, 1995a) within research areas that involve irrational and unpredictable behaviours (such as studies of relationships and networks). For example, there have been challenges to the established view that *'traditional positivist philosophies of science [...] assume that the social sciences adhere to a single scientific method for the justification of their knowledge claim'* (Anderson, 1986, p. 156). A positivist approach views the researcher's opinion as irrelevant: Comte (1853) states *'there is no real knowledge but that which is based on facts'* (p. 73).

Ozanne and Hudson (1989) highlight the dichotomies between the two research paradigms (see table 4.1). Positivism assumes that reality exists independently of the observer; hence, it is the job of the researcher to identify reality. The interpretivist viewpoint is that the researcher does not assume any pre-existing reality, but rather aims to make sense of social structures, paying attention to the use of language, conversations and the meanings that individuals create (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2008).

Table 4.1. Positivist and Interpretivist Approaches (Adapted from Ozanne and Hudson, 1989).

Assumptions	Positivist	Interpretivist
Ontological		
Nature of reality	Objective; tangible Single Fragmentable Divisible	Socially constructed Multiple Holistic Contextual
Nature of social being	Deterministic Reactive	Voluntaristic Proactive
Axiological		
Overriding goal	‘Explanation’ via subsumption under general laws; prediction	‘Understanding’ based on Verstehen
Epistemological		
Knowledge generated	Nomothetic Time-free	Idiographic Time-bound
View of causality	Context independent Real causes exist	Context dependent Multiple, simultaneous shaping
Research relationship	Dualism; separation Privileged point of observation	Interactive; cooperative No privileged point of observation

Since our goal is to understand members of virtual communities, their behaviours and practices with a focus on network development, an interpretivist philosophical perspective is taken. Rather than possessing the belief that reality is unchanging,

divisible and fragmentable (Ozanne and Hudson, 1989); interpretivists take the view that reality is based on different perceptions that lead to different realities; thus, reality is perceptual. The interpretivist stance sees the context in which behaviours and events occur as influencing the meaning of the phenomenon. Therefore, associated methodologies view reality as holistic, where the phenomenon cannot be isolated from its natural setting.

The axiological assumptions of positivism are centred upon the goal of searching for a systematic link between variables to explain a phenomenon, which assists in making predictions; whereas the axiological assumptions of interpretivism are based on seeking and exploring understanding. Szmigin and Foxall (2000) assert that interpretivism consists of highlighting the individual and collective meanings, whilst accepting this to be only the present understanding, which is subject to the '*past understandings and knowledge influencing present and future reality*' (p. 190). Associated methodologies, such as ethnographic research, will capture descriptive accounts of the phenomenon (Calder and Tybout, 1989) by utilising qualitative data-collection instruments that provide '*well-grounded, rich descriptions and explanations of processes occurring in local contexts*' (Miles and Huberman 1984, p. 15).

The epistemological assumptions of positivism, according to Ozanne and Hudson (1989), highlight the importance of proper scientific protocol, which consists of identifying a conceptual framework that is used in a controlled environment. Scientific protocol refers to the prior identification of a conceptual framework in order to test relationships and measure variables. In contrast, interpretivists do not test relationships; rather, the research strategy evolves within the changing

environment. Thompson *et al.* (1989) consider that interpretivists may identify behaviour patterns; however, they regard the world as too complex to categorise this pattern into causal relationships.

A central benefit of opting for an interpretivist rather than positivist stance is that interpretivism provides ‘a new means of investigating previously unexplored questions’ (Sandberg 2005, p. 42). The online environment and, more specifically, virtual communities are known for their dynamic nature. By adopting a methodology from an interpretivist philosophical viewpoint, emphasis is placed on the dynamic research setting (in this study, a virtual community). Methodologies associated with the positivist perspective are unable to deal with the fluidity of the research setting and have often been deemed as static, as the methods simply take snapshots of a situation at a single point in time (Szmigin and Foxall, 2000). In accordance with interpretivist research, meanings are not fixed (Hacking, 1999); concepts such as interaction and networks are subjective and determined by their context. This further amplifies the appropriateness of an interpretivist philosophical stance, and recognises that reality is neither exterior nor objective; rather, it is socially constructed.

When studying interactions in the context of a virtual community, a social constructionist is concerned with how networks develop and the types of exchange and interaction that contribute to how networks of members are developed and sustained in virtual communities. Social constructionists place emphasis on the fundamental elements and processes that have an impact on how networks are

established and developed. This study lends itself to a social constructionist¹ viewpoint because social construction is a school of thought that focuses on the way people make sense of the world. For Shotter (1975), social constructionism acknowledges the shared experience of people via the medium of language. Thus, the focus is not on the quantity of data collected, but on its depth and quality. All forms of observation are viewed as crucial; for example, across a range of data-collection instruments, such as participant observation, as well as in-depth semi-structured interviews (Phillimore and Goodson, 2004).

4.3 The Netnographic Approach

The use of and participation in virtual communities, social network sites, discussion forums, multi-user gaming platforms and blogs has become an integral part of life for millions of people. Members of virtual communities will come together to communicate, commune, socialise and understand topics of interest. Research demonstrates that consumer groups are no longer bound by local or temporal environments, but are connected by computer-mediated communication (Kozinets, 2006). Belk (1995c) refers to this as a new form of consumer behaviour, which moves away from *'the traditional focus on consumers as information processors to conceptualise consumers as socially connected beings'* (p. 228). Kozinets (2002) defines netnography as *'a qualitative research methodology that has adapted ethnographic research techniques to study the cultures and communities that emerge through computer-mediated communication'* (p. 62).

¹ The idea of the social constructionism was developed by Berger and Luckmann Berger, P. L. & Luckmann, T. 1966. *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*, USA, Anchor Books, ibid. and Watslawick Watslawick, P. 1984. *The Invented Reality*, New York, Norton..

The origin of netnography is based on ethnography, which is a methodology used by anthropologists to study indigenous populations and is often associated with cultural anthropological research (Hackley, 2003). Ethnographic accounts are considered to be a way of *'talking about theory, philosophy and epistemology while maintaining the traditional task of interpreting different ways of life'* (Joy 1994). When employing ethnographic methods to consumer research as part of the 'Consumer Behavior Odyssey', Belk *et al.* (1989) found that:

this approach differs from surveys or experiments which assume that the researcher understands the phenomenon prior to doing the research, so that hypothesis and fully specified data-collection and analysis plans are possible. In naturalistic inquiry, no such assumption is made. Instead, researchers build an understanding of the phenomenon as it occurs in situ, later testing the veracity of that understanding also in situ (p. 3).

By beginning with an anthropological understanding of culture and adapting ethnographic research methods, the netnographic research process of entrée, data collection, analysis and interpretation, and research ethics has been used across marketing and consumer-behaviour research to study a range of online gatherings and cultures. Employing netnographic methods, the scholars Kozinets (1999, 2006), Muñiz and O'Guinn (2001), Catterall and Maclaren (2002), Brown *et al.* (2003), Langer and Beckman (2005), Jupp (2006) and Sandlin (2007) have developed the methodology by discussing its challenges, opportunities and varieties.

Netnographies are fundamentally concerned with describing, interpreting and providing in-depth accounts of the interactions between people and groups (Berg and Lune, 2012). For Jupp (2006), netnography is defined as a:

qualitative, interpretive research methodology that adapts the traditional, in-person ethnographic techniques of anthropology to the study of the online

cultures and communities formed through computer-mediated communications (p. 252).

According to Giesler and Pohlmann (2003), a netnographic methodology allows for the immersion into the virtual-consumption cortex. The immersive approach often associated with netnographic research is widely acknowledged as being ideal for studying the interactions that occur within virtual communities (Maulana and Eckhardt, 2007; Chong, 2010). The chosen methodology is ideal for exploring how members participate in a virtual community and how they create and sustain networks in that community. Morgan and Watson (2009) assert that netnography, or Internet-based ethnography, may *'offer a window into the naturally occurring behaviour in a context which is not fabricated by the researcher'* (p. 116).

Insights into the *'cultural realities of consumer groups as they live their activities'* (Kozinets 2006, p. 282) will result in natural observations from an unbiased point of view. Netnographic research has been previously employed to understand the characteristics and values of virtual communities (Kozinets, 2001; Pettit, 2010; Rokka, 2010). Because members' behaviours and interactions are influenced by the nature and characteristics of the virtual community, a netnographic research approach will provide holistic descriptions of the research environment. Not only does netnographic research offer an unbiased perspective of the virtual community being studied, but it also allows for high levels of adaptability. For instance, virtual communities are often characterised by their dynamic nature; the use of a netnographic approach allows researchers to adapt to any changes to employ the most suitable research method (Hogg *et al.*, 2006).

Most ethnographers abandon the idea of absolute objectivity by merging themselves with the culture that is being studied (Ellen, 1984). By understanding the cultural context and social environment, the 'emic view' is taken. The emic understanding refers to the insider's view of the world, as opposed to the etic understanding, which is the outsider's perspective (Creswell, 1999). Etic understanding is achieved through interpretation, theoretical explanation and analytical explanation (Berg and Lune, 2012). Thus, interpretive research such as netnography '*relies upon understanding informants' points of view (emic) to portray broader cultural meanings (etic point of view)*' (Spiggle 1994, p. 492). Many netnographers advocate a researcher's involvement and participation in the research environment in order to gain an insider's perspective of the culture and norms of the online gathering (Kozinets, 1999; Nelson and Otnes, 2005).

By employing a mixed-methods approach, Giesler and Pohlmann (2003) used netnographic interviews, emails, board postings, home pages, historical blogs as well as the researchers' own observations to uncover the inter-relations between technology, culture and consumption on the website Napster.com. The data provided thick, descriptive accounts of online file-sharing culture, and offered naturalist observations of consumption meanings and surrounding communal activities (Giesler and Pohlmann, 2003). By opting for a multi-method research design in this study, involving active participation as well as unobtrusive data-collection methods, the researcher will be provided with in-depth insights and meanings of what has been observed.

Academics such as Catterall and Maclaren (2001), Langer and Beckmann (2005), Kozinets (2006) and Sandlin (2007) have identified the strengths and weaknesses of

the research method. When compared with traditional ethnography, Internet-based ethnography is believed to be faster, simpler and less expensive. This is consistent with Kozinets' (2002b) assertion that unlike traditional ethnographic research, netnography is viewed as *'far less time consuming and elaborate'* (p. 62). Rokka (2010) also states that netnographic research methods are more naturalistic and provide a holistic perspective into the research phenomenon, whereas interviews, focus groups and surveys are more obtrusive data-collection methods. However, Rokka (2010) notes that researchers can become overwhelmed by the massive amounts of raw data, such as textual communication, available from the online community. This can be overcome through the use of data analysis management software such as NVivo, in which data can be systematically stored and organised.

The adaptive nature of netnography allows for researchers to utilise the most appropriate data-collection tools based on the dynamic virtual-community environment. Rather than treating the interactions and activities of virtual-community members as mere content, netnographic research places emphasis on the embedded expression of meaning in relation to dialogue between members. Thus, significance is given to understanding and exploring the nature of the virtual community, the characteristics of members, the language used, the communal norms and cultures, and the types of interactions that occur. Table 4.2 below outlines the methodological orientation of this study.

Table 4.2. Methodological Orientation of the Research.

Research element	Methodological orientation
Philosophical commitments	Interpretivism; reality as socially constructed; exploratory study.
Methodological paradigms	Netnographic research design with the use of a case study: a virtual community.
Research strategy	Exploring how networks develop; the nature of interactions between members of a virtual community.
Methodologies/ research techniques	Qualitative methodologies: (1) unobtrusive observation from historic postings and comments (lurking); (2) active participant (online and offline); (3) in-depth semi-structured netnographic interviews; (4) qualitative data from an online survey.

4.4 Research Site: WatchZone

An important step for netnographic research is to identify the most suitable case study. The researcher explored various communities by lurking and conducting preliminary analysis in order to ascertain whether the community would be a suitable research site. Explorations and preliminary analysis was conducted on communities centred upon high-involvement goods and activities as discussions between members were often detailed and highly descriptive. The researcher studied a range of consumption communities such as online communities for car enthusiasts, high-end luxury handbag collectors and video gamers. Although issues concerning the quality of the online discussion arose as the researcher analysed the communities. For instance when studying the car enthusiasts community, the researcher found that while the majority of postings were in-depth and involved descriptive narratives regarding luxury super cars, there was not a regularly group of members contributing to discussions. Discussants in this community tended to post during pre- and post-purchase and rarely returned to the site, thus making it difficult to understand

member characteristics and community boundaries. As part of the research site selection process, a high-end luxury handbag enthusiast community was also investigated. This community had a clear set of regular members contributing to discussions by posting information on their handbags and sharing news of latest handbag collections. However, the range of discussions was limited with only a small number of regular contributors, similar issues emerged when conducting preliminary analysis of the video gaming community.

After analysing a series of communities, WatchZone (please note, a pseudonym is used throughout) was selected as the chosen case study for this research. Based on the guiding aim of the research, it is imperative that the research questions and interests match the virtual community (Stake, 1995). Kozinets (1998) offers a widely recognised set of guidelines for choosing a virtual community that is *'dictated by anthropologically-based definition and not simply examining a temporary gathering'* (p. 368). The criteria are as follows:

- 1) Relevance to the research topic and question.
- 2) Communication that is recent and regular.
- 3) Communication flows between participants demonstrating interactivity.
- 4) A critical mass of communicators and an energetic feel to the community.
- 5) Heterogeneous, in terms of the number of different participants.
- 6) Rich discussions offering detailed and descriptive data.

An initial exploration of WatchZone demonstrates that watches are sophisticated products that require a large amount of information-searching when making an investment of such high value, particularly for luxury watches that have a high price point. This would suggest that discussions amongst members will not be superficial in nature but rather offer deep insights into the interaction that occurs online between these luxury-watch collectors. In line with Kozinets' (1999) selection criteria, the discussions and dialogue that occurs is in-depth and descriptive, as members exchange detailed information about objects in relation to their collections.

The activities of WatchZone members are focused on collecting luxury watches. This consumption activity has received limited attention in an online context. Collector behaviour is considered as a specialised form of consumer behaviour where the primary focus is on gathering more of something, and it is recognised as a prolonged activity. For Belk (1995a), collecting is defined as *'the process of actively, selectively, and passionately acquiring and possessing things removed from ordinary use and perceived as part of a set of non-identical objects or experiences'* (p. 67). Existing research has explored offline collecting behaviour that occurs individually (Belk, 1995b), in dyadic relationships (Hughes and Hogg, 2006) and within families (Pearce, 1994). As research has neglected to investigate collecting behaviour in a virtual-community setting, WatchZone will fill this gap in the knowledge and provide an appropriate setting to study network development.

Founded in 2002 by a collector of Panerai (an Italian luxury-watch manufacturer) watches, WatchZone was established from the abandoned virtual community, Paneristi. With the founding member's desire to create a virtual watch-collecting platform that is free from tension and conflict, the community is independent from

watch manufacturers, both financially and in terms of information. Unlike existing virtual watch communities, which focused on less expensive watch brands, such as Seiko and Tag Heuer, WatchZone forums are dedicated to a diverse range of high-end luxury-watch manufacturers. According to the virtual community, it has since grown around the philosophy of ‘treat others as you would want others to treat you’. The home page of WatchZone makes the statement that this virtual watch community is renowned for passion, openness, and sharing of knowledge and experience.

The heterogeneous nature of the community is not only reflected in the diverse brand forums, but it is also evident in the complex management structure. WatchZone’s management team consists of an executive team that includes the chief executive officer, who was also the founder of the site, a general manager; a managing director and special advisor (see illustration 4.1 for the management structure). The general manager deals with the day-to-day running of WatchZone, where the moderators of the forums report directly to him. The managing director does not deal with the day-to-day running of WatchZone, but has a manager for the Asia Pacific region and a community liaison (New York City) manager reporting to him.

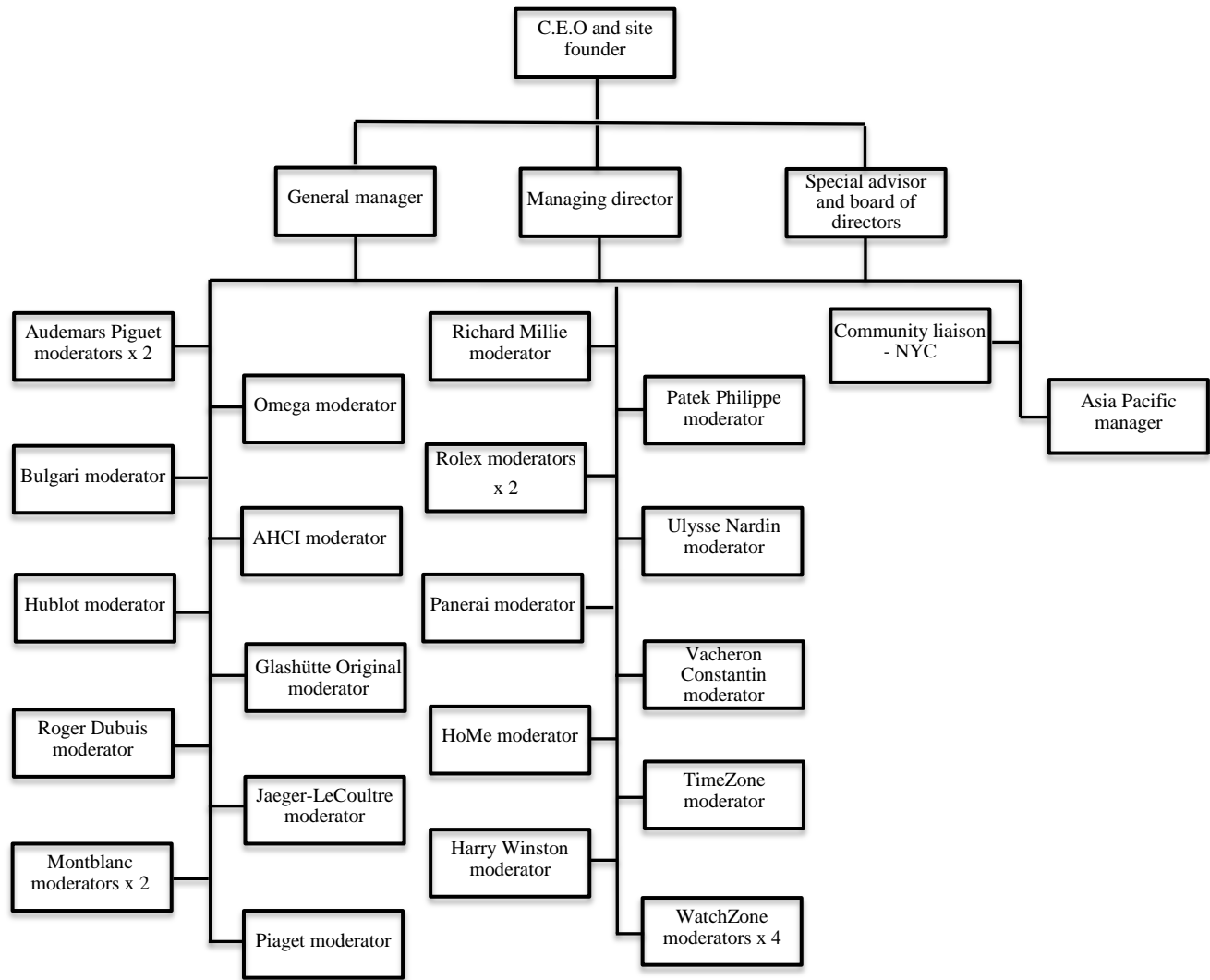


Illustration 4.1 WatchZone Management Team.

To answer the research questions, WatchZone is complex and multifaceted, consisting of a complex international management structure monitoring 30 luxury-watch manufacturer brands. An assemblage of individuals (i.e. consumers and collectors), organisations (e.g. independent watch dealers and manufacturers) and high-end luxury brands (e.g. Rolex, Patek Philippe, Omega) interact predominately online, although they also gather at offline events. Thus, all aspects of this

community are heterogeneous, are centred upon collecting behaviour, incorporate a mutual interest in an object (luxury watches), reflect a shared passion for horology, include an activity (collecting behaviour) and cover small and global watch manufacturers and brands (such as Audemars Piguet, Jaeger-LeCoultre and Patek Philippe).

4.5 Summary

This chapter focused on the philosophical considerations of this study. Directed by the central research aim of the study, an interpretivist perspective is chosen over a positivist viewpoint in order to conduct a naturalist in-depth data set. Interpretivists are often driven by the desire to identify and explore complex behavioural pattern in an evolving and dynamic research environment.

A methodology associated with this philosophical stance is netnographic research. The chosen research site, WatchZone offers members horological information related to the luxury-watch industry, across multiple forums dedicated to watch brands such as Omega and Patek Philippe. The community comprises of diverse members: individuals (i.e. consumers and collectors) and organisations (e.g. independent and authorised watch dealers, high-end international luxury brands, and independent watch manufacturers). The community accommodates the varying needs and motivations for the assemblage of participants, and facilitates diverse interactions and activities. In this regard, WatchZone presents an ideal opportunity to investigate the how networks of members are developed and sustained.

Chapter V

Research Design and Data Analysis

5.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a chronological discussion of the data-collection process. A mixed-method approach is employed, where the changing role of the netnographer/researcher is explored based on the participation in the online community. Thus, a review of the research methods is offered, including participant observation, active participation, netnographic semi-structured interviews, and gatekeepers' assistance in data collection. This is followed by a review of the relevant ethical considerations.

The chapter concludes by considering the strategy for analysing and interpreting the data. The methodology prepared the researcher for the active research phase, in order to extract meaning from the data and gain insights into the relationships formed in the watch-collector community. The methods used to code, analyse and interpret the data are discussed. Computer-assisted data-analysis software was used as part of the analysis strategy, and so database compilation, issues concerning validity and reflexivity, and benefits and limitations associated with using software such as NVivo are also discussed.

5.2 Data-Collection Process

The data collection took place over an 18-month period (see table 5.1) in a constantly changing research environment. The iterative process of data collection and data analysis – an inherent aspect of netnographic research – meant that data analysis

began during the first phase of data collection. The researcher continued to participate in the virtual community throughout the life of the study. Towards the end of the phase of writing the PhD dissertation, the researcher participated socially on the off-topic forum.

Table 5.1 Phases of the Data-Collection Process.

Research Phase	Time Period	Data-collection Methods
Phase 1 – Planning entrée	January 2012 – April 2012	Pre-understanding: researching horology and other watch-collector communities Participant observation
Phase 2 – Active participation	April 2012 – March 2013	Field notes Participant observation
Phase 3 – Interviewing	June 2012 – September 2012	Interviews (online and offline) Field notes Participant observation
Phase 4 – Assistance from gatekeepers	August 2012 – March 2013	Participant observation Field notes

The data collection involved four phases: (1) planning entrée, (2) active participation (an ongoing phase throughout the life of the project), (3) interviewing, and (4) assistance from gatekeepers. Although the four phases are distinct, with a specific aim attached to each, they are related and overlapping. The research methods were derived from traditional ethnography: the researcher planned how to gain entrée into a group, gathered and analysed data whilst ensuring a trustworthiness in the interpretation of the data, and finally gained feedback from the participants as part of the member-check process (Sandlin, 2007). Adopting a mixed-method approach allows for a fuller and richer understanding of the research phenomenon (Hewson, 2006); thus, offering a more complete exploration of WatchZone.

5.2.1 Phase 1 – Planning and Gaining Entrée

Aim: To understand the virtual community, its culture and communal practices.

The researcher gathered information on horology, watch-collecting and other watch-collecting sites before gaining entrée into the virtual community. Such ‘pre-understanding’ offers insight into the specific problem before the main data-collection period (Gummesson, 2000). Another aspect of pre-understanding involved ‘lurking’: observing communal activities from the side-line (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995). Observing discussions assisted the researcher to identify gatekeepers and potential key informants for the study. Researchers have recognised that non-participant observation reveals the types of language and shorthand used in discussion threads, the role of moderators, and the purpose of each forum (Arnould and Wallendorf, 1994; Kozinets, 2001;). The researcher kept a research diary throughout the study, where she reflected upon the communal discussions and activities after each visit to WatchZone. During an email exchange, the general manager stated that the ‘HoMe’ forum was the most diverse WatchZone forum.

I think for a diverse range of posts you should actually look into the home forum, Horological Meandering; we call it HoMe because that one is our general watch discussion forum. (General Manager of WatchZone)

In order to develop an accurate perspective on the community’s culture, norms and practices, the researcher downloaded discussions from the home forum between 1 January 2012 and 30 April 2012. At this point, the data collection and analysis occurred simultaneously. A key characteristic of netnography is the intertwined nature of the data-collection and analysis phase (Beckman and Langer, 2003).

Emerging ideas and themes emerged by reading through discussion threads several times; such themes were altered and developed in successive data-collection phases.

5.2.2 Phase 2 – Active Participation

Aim: To fit in as a cultural insider to gain the perspective and experience of a WatchZone member.

At this stage, the researcher's participation increased and developed from that of a lurking member to that of a 'newbie'. Primarily participating online, WatchZone members also gather offline; thus, this netnography possesses ethnographic elements. First-hand engagement in a cultural setting is associated with multiple benefits (Hackley, 2003; Belk, 2006; Sandlin, 2007). A key advantage of active participation is that the researcher experiences the virtual community through the eyes of a member, adding legitimacy to the study. When participating online the researcher ensured that the course of the discussions was not disrupted to ensure that the natural flow of interactions was not altered (Kozinets, 1998). As the researcher has a genuine interest in luxury and designer jewellery, taking on the role of a luxury-watch enthusiast and WatchZone member was made easier.

The immersive approach to participation and observation offers researchers a full breadth of experience as a communal member. Engaging in the offline communal activities increases the reliability of the findings and the understanding of the phenomenon from a different viewpoint (Cova and Pace, 2006). Thus, the researcher was to form a more tangible online identity and build a rapport with members. The written accounts (such as keeping a research diary) provided an opportunity to reflect on the journey from an outsider through to the development of social links with

others in the community. Similarly, Kozinets (2010) recognises that field notes '*offer details about the social and interactional processes that make up the members of online cultures and communities' everyday lives and activities*' (p. 114). The dual role as a legitimate community member and researcher was made known at offline gatherings; it acted as an opportunity to ask members to participate in the study as interview respondents.

5.2.3 Phase 3 – Interviewing

Aim: To interview members of the online community who varied in their levels of participation in the site and their activeness in watch-collecting.

As interviews are an ideal data-collection instrument when researchers want to understand participants' perceptions and how meaning is attached to certain phenomena, interview questions were centred upon understanding interaction and participation in WatchZone, network development and collecting behaviour. Interviews began with a grand-tour question (McCracken, 1988): 'Could you tell me about your reasons for participating on WatchZone?' The use of semi-structured interviews enables researchers to ask a number of predetermined questions and topics (Berg and Lune, 2012), in a systematic order, whilst allowing for probing into deeper meanings offering the freedom to digress (see appendix 3 for interview guide). Such interviews provided thick descriptions, yielding insights into WatchZone and collecting behaviour and allowing comparisons to be drawn between interviews. As the data-collection progressed, the subsequent interviews changed: the language and structure were altered, and more appropriate questions were asked in order to fill gaps in the data. It is also worth noting that if a member did not respond to an

invitation to take part in the research project, the researcher did not pursue dialogue with that member.

Interviews were conducted in person, via Skype, via FaceTime, via email, or via WatchZone private messaging (i.e. an in-built private-messaging function). This variety of interview modes allowed the researcher to recruit geographically-dispersed participants. Despite the obvious limitation that email interviews do not allow the researcher to spontaneously probe any interesting topics or responses that unexpectedly arise, and the lack of visual and non-verbal cues (Lindlof and Taylor, 2002), a more circumspect, in-depth, and long-term interview style develops (Bampton and Cowton, 2002), without the need to organise a mutually convenient time for the researcher and participant.

A common sample approach in netnographic research is snowball sampling. ‘Snowball’ in this context refers to using key informants introduce to the researcher to others who will take part in the study and vouch for the legitimacy of the research (Berg and Lune, 2012). The key informants of the study were asked whether their acquaintances in WatchZone could also be interviewed. These key informants then used their credibility within the virtual community to back up the researcher.

The first round of interviews targeted interview participants who were devotees and moderators of the virtual community. Studies into virtual communities recognise that members have different motivations for joining and contributing to a forum (Wilson and Peterson, 2002; Kozinets, 2002b; Rokka, 2010). In order to fully understand how virtual interaction and networks develop, participation of a range of members was required.

With the support of key informants, who acted as a source of insider knowledge, the second round of interviews targeted a smaller number of members who *'lack strong social ties to the group, and maintain only a superficial or passing interest in the consumption activity itself and have relatively weak abilities and skills'* (Kozinets 2010, p. 33). In this regard, interview data was obtained from a range of members, in terms of motivation and participation in WatchZone and orientation towards collecting luxury watches.

5.2.4 Phase 4 – Assistance from Gatekeepers

Aim: Gatekeepers to initiate discussions on the home forum based on the research questions.

Once the researcher had developed her online identity in the virtual community, forming links with WatchZone gatekeepers was pivotal for her to gain further access to data. Gatekeepers are people who are in a position to grant or deny access to a research environment (Feldman *et al.*, 2003). For WatchZone, Tony was a gatekeeper who possessed a formal position of power in the community through his role as the General Manager.

During the final stages of data collection, the researcher aimed to work closely with moderators and the general manager, who would then initiate discussions on behalf of the researcher. As the moderators and the General Manager; Tony were well known and popular amongst community members, a network effect emerged as their discussion threads generated high levels of responses. The researcher participated in these discussions as a member, as it assisted to guide the discussions in line with answering the research questions. This parallels Kozinets' (2010) suggestion that

researchers do not have to partake in every type of community activity, but rather focus on the activities that contribute to answering the research questions. The discussion threads initiated by the gatekeepers involved asking the following questions.

- What do you consider to be their favourite aspect of watch-collecting?
- What motivated you to join WatchZone?
- What types of relationships have you formed with others in the community?

Furthermore as the General Manager and moderators assisted with the study, the researcher's identity and her research became legitimised across WatchZone. The researcher also received private messages regarding participating in the study and invitations to attend further face-to-face communal gatherings.

5.3 Data Set

The researcher's participation increased and developed from that of a lurking member of the online community to that of a newbie to the community. The nature of the data collection evolved as the researcher became more active on the site (see illustration 5.1). A combination of netnographic and ethnographic methods was employed, as data was collected online and offline. Through active participation in the virtual community and communal activities, the researcher was given an insider's perspective of the culture. The end result of ethnographic and netnographic research design is a thick description and written account of the culture under investigation.

It is worth noting that during the early phase of data collection, access to the virtual community was denied by the general manager. Virtual-community members were

initially hesitant about assisting the researcher for two main reasons. Firstly, because there is some form of rivalry with other virtual watch communities it was suggested that the researcher worked for or was involved in these virtual collector communities. Secondly, members were reluctant to reveal their identities, as their watch collections are highly valuable in terms of monetary and sentimental value.

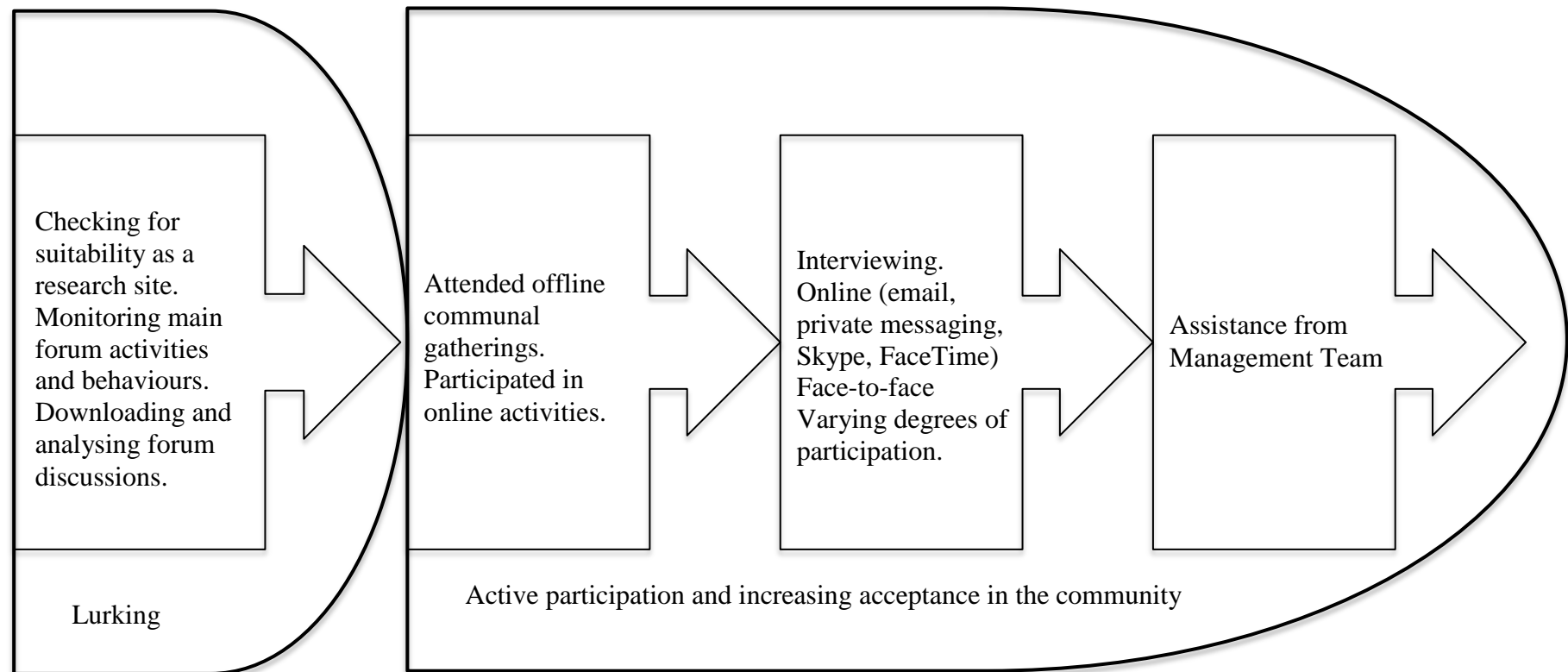


Illustration 5.1 Development of Researcher's Acceptance in WatchZone and Data-collection Phases

The researcher formed relationships with several key informants, as members made contact by email about participating in the research project after attending a face-to-face gathering where they met the researcher. The interviews were conducted over a four-month period, with two female and eighteen male participants. This split between males and females was deemed as adequate, as the majority of WatchZone members are male.

The interview participants were asked to provide informed consent, where their anonymity was guaranteed and they were not monetarily compensated. Basic demographic information was not requested. As this study is an online ethnographic in nature, statistical issues, such as sampling, are not considered relevant. The interviews generally lasted between 30 minutes and two hours.

The mixed-method approach offered detailed insights, providing a rich and more complete understanding of the research phenomenon. The data-collection process resulted in a compilation of:

- offline informal discussions with WatchZone members about their participation and collecting behaviour at face-to-face gatherings;
- twenty three online interviews conducted via FaceTime, Skype, and email;
- two offline (in person) interviews with key informants;
- non-participant online observation of WatchZone for three months, tracking the interaction and exchange amongst members;
- active participation on WatchZone;
- field notes written throughout the course of the data collection;
- compilation of 907 posts from the home forum; and

- compilation of 30 pictures posted by WatchZone members.

5.4 Ethical Considerations

As an online ethnographer, there were two key ethical considerations: firstly, whether the virtual community under investigation, WatchZone, was a public or private space; and secondly, what is viewed as informed consent in the online environment.

Discussions concerning the private versus public nature of virtual communities have recognised that netnographers acting as ‘professional lurkers’ is ethical (Brewer, 2000; Kozinets, 2002b). However, this unobtrusive form of data collection might lead to the unwelcome engagement and participation in virtual communities of individuals who are using discussions as part of research studies. As it was difficult to obtain informed consent from every individual member who contributed to WatchZone discussions, the researcher ensured that access to the community was granted by the General Management and moderators of WatchZone.

King (1996) and Sharf (1999) call for heightened ethical measures when conducting observational netnographic research because collecting this type of data might be viewed as ‘electronic eavesdropping’. However, the use of pseudonyms throughout the study was deemed as more than enough to protect the identity of the virtual community and its members. As participants were initially reluctant to discuss their watch collections and the networks they had formed with other collectors and watch dealers, the researcher ensured that their confidentiality would be protected.

In accordance with ethical guidelines produced by Kozinets (2002), three procedures were followed:

- 1) The researcher fully disclosed her presence in the virtual community. This procedure was fulfilled in the researcher's introductory post on the home forum at the beginning of the data-collection phase. During the in-person meetings and attendance at the annual get-together, other invitees were made aware of the researcher's dual role in the virtual community.
- 2) The researcher ensured confidentiality and anonymity of the participants. At the beginning of each interview, the researcher informed participants that they were taking part in the research.
- 3) The researcher sought and incorporated feedback from virtual-community members. The general manager and two key informants were asked to take part in a member-check process during the analysis and interpretation stage. The member check ensured that WatchZone was accurately represented.

5.5 Data Analysis and Interpretation

The data-analysis strategy outlines how the data was decoded by identifying the emergent perspectives, themes and interpretations. Although many researchers provide details of a structured data-analysis strategy (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Kozinets, 2010), the chosen methodology meant that the data did not always occur in sequence. In contrast to quantitative analysts, who take a more sequential position of data reduction that involves standard deviation and data display consisting of regressions, qualitative analysts are considered to be more fluid and pioneering

(Geertz, 1973), allowing for thick description and rendering more meaning. In accordance with netnographic research design, the different analysis processes and stages are often revisited multiple times as more questions emerge and new connections are uncovered, allowing for a deep understanding of the material (Spiggle, 1994).

For Miles and Huberman (1984), these three streams of analysis – data reduction, data display and conclusion drawing/verification – are interwoven before, during and after the data collection. The overall data analysis involved six key phases (see table 5.2), with the overall aim being to build a theory from the raw data.

Table 5.2 Analysis Strategy and Analytical Processes used in NVivo.

Kozinets' (2010) Data Analysis Strategy	NVivo Process
1. Coding	Open coding Categorising codes
2. Noting	Coding on – breaking down codes to better understand meanings
3. Abstracting and comparing	Data reduction Writing summary statements
4. Checking and refining	Writing analytical memos against lower-order codes
5. Generalising	Writing analytical memos against higher-order codes
6. Theorising	Validating and synthesising analytical memos

The high volume of data meant that data reduction occurred throughout the life of the project. Data reduction involved coding, writing summaries and memos, and identifying emergent themes. Miles and Huberman (1984) consider that data reduction sharpens, sorts, focuses and organises data to allow final conclusions to be

drawn and verified. Following data reduction, the categorisation process was employed to label the data (McCracken 1988), in order to identify which aspects should be set aside, emphasised or minimised (Spiggle 1994).

Throughout the initial data-reduction process, the researcher focused on understanding different types of interaction that occurred and how networks formed in WatchZone. As part of the data-reduction process, different levels of analysis were required, which were centred upon member interactions, networks and collecting behaviour (see appendix 4 for further details). The interviews were a particularly important data source, as they were the one of the most salient (Miles and Huberman, 1984).

The process of data display involved the extrapolation of data into systematic patterns and identifying interrelationships. In line with Miles and Huberman (1984), the creation of higher-order categories are beyond those that are initially categorised through the data-reduction process (see table 5.3). This process is often referred to as ‘dimensionalisation’, where properties of categories and constructs are identified (Spiggle, 1994). The researcher aimed to generate theory through dimensionalisation by exploring and defining network formation and development amongst WatchZone members in order to establish constructs that are clarified and enriched with conceptual meaning (Strauss and Corbin, 1998).

Table 5.3 Core Categories and Codes that Emerged from Data Collection.

Core Categories	Codes
Member type	Individuals – collectors, moderators, management team Business users – watch dealers, watch manufacturers, brands
Member's role	Role of moderators Role of executive management team Role of collectors/ watch enthusiasts Role of business users – watch boutiques, watch manufacturers, watch dealers, brand representatives
Communal characteristics	Support mechanism Emotional support Membership and boundaries Story-telling Enforcing communal norms
Atmosphere	Trusting each other when asking for advice Trusting newbies Competition vs. cooperation through collecting Function of a relationship Power position of actors Stable vs. dynamic atmosphere
Exchange episodes	Informational Social Financial Product/service
Nature of exchange on forums	Brand forums News forums Buyer-seller forum
Collector-orientated activities	Sharing new watch purchase Assistance with decision-making Requesting technical advice Assistance with sourcing watch Face-to-face (in person) gatherings Management team announcing new watches Reports on watch conventions Sharing the hunt WristScan
Collecting motivation	Financial investment Childhood fantasy Status
Participation motivation	Informational Social Financial

In order to draw conclusions from the data, the researcher began this activity at the start of the analysis, making decisions on narratives and making notes on regularities and themes. Miles and Huberman (1984) and Hirschman (1986) state that these conclusions drawn at the early stage of analysis are held lightly, allowing for the researcher to maintain openness. According to Spiggle (1994), refutation involves *'deliberately subjecting one's emerging inferences – categories, constructs, propositions, or conceptual framework – to empirical scrutiny'* (p. 496). By engaging in this final data-analysis stage, the researcher stepped back from the data to consider the implications of the conclusions on the research questions and generate theory. A key feature of theory-building in case-study research is to combine the data-collection process with the data-analysis phase (Eisenhardt, 1989). As the researcher kept a diary, this assisted with checking for subjectivity, gauging when data saturation was reached, and documented the thinking behind the codes and categories. Table 5.4 shows a more detailed account of the data-analysis strategy.

Table 5.4. Data-analysis Process Used in NVivo and its Connection to Existing Analysis Frameworks

Data Analysis Process (Miles and Huberman 1984)	Netnographic Data Analysis Process (Kozinets 2010)	Process engaged in NVivo adapted from Bazeley (2009)	
First stream of analysis activity - data reduction: the process of selecting, focusing, simplifying, abstracting, and transforming raw data. As data-collection proceeds, there are further episodes of data reduction.	Coding: affixing codes or categories to netnographic data. Codes, classifications, names or labels are assigned to particular units of data. These codes label data as belonging to, or being an example of, more general phenomena.	Coding data	Phase one - open coding: broadly participant driven, deconstruction of the data such as blog posts, interview transcripts and field notes from original chronology into broad themes (participant driven, descriptive initial coding).
	Noting: reflections on the data are noted, also known as ‘memoing’.		Phase two - categorisation: merging, renaming, deleting, and clustering related codes generated in phase one, now reorganised into categories of codes.
Second stream of analysis activity - data display: an organised assembly of information that permits conclusions to be drawn and action taken.	Abstracting and comparing: materials are sorted and sifted to identify similar phrases, shared sequences, relationships, and distinct differences. The abstracting process builds the categorised codes into a higher order or more general, conceptual constructs, and compares commonalities and differences.		Phase three - coding on: breaking down the reorganised categories from phases one and two into sub-categories to better understand the meanings embedded therein.
Third stream of analysis activity - conclusion drawing/ verification: the meanings emerging from the data are tested for their plausibility, sturdiness, and validity.	Checking and refinement: returns to the field for the next wave of data collection in order to check and refine the understanding of the patterns, processes and commonalities and differences.	Managing codes	Phase four - data reduction: consolidating codes into a more abstract and conceptual map of a final framework of codes for reporting purposes.
	Generalising: elaborates a small set of generalisations that cover or explain the consistencies in the data set.		Phase five - writing summary statements: against lower-order codes so as to offer a synthesis of the coded content they contain; to use writing itself as a tool to prompt deeper thinking about the data. These statements are considered to be descriptive accounts.
	Theorising: confronting the generalisations gathered from the data with a formalised body of knowledge that uses constructs or theories, constructing new theory in close coordination with the analysis and existing relevant body of knowledge.	Extrapolating deeper meaning	Phase six - writing analytical memos: against the higher-level codes to accurately summarise the content of each category and its codes and propose empirical findings against such categories.
			Phase seven - synthesising analytical memos: testing, validating and revising analytical memos so as to self-audit proposed findings by seeking evidence in the data beyond textual quotes to support the stated findings and seeking to expand on deeper meanings embedded in the data. Phase eight - synthesising analytical memos: developed into a coherent and well-supported outcome statement or findings report. Finalising phase eight will result in having produced a draft analysis and findings chapter.

By employing these data-analysis processes, data was organised in order to extract meanings, arrive at conclusions and generate theories in accordance with the approach suggested by Miles and Huberman (1984), as well as keeping in mind the principles of netnographic research. Writing up preliminary sections of data analysis, along with collecting data and participating in the virtual community, was a central part of this netnographic study.

Because the researcher was dealing with a data set of more than 1,000 pieces of information, the use of NVivo allowed for data management and knowledge storage, whilst assisting to produce an audit trail. Academics have long recognised the importance of audit-trail production and systematic analysis methods to draw conclusions as key criteria for trustworthy and replicable research (Miles and Huberman, 1984). Gibbs *et al.* (2002) have termed such programmes as ‘theory builders’, as NVivo has been identified as a powerful tool to assist with the identification of patterns in data. NVivo acted as a management tool, facilitating the organisation, storage and retrieval and interrogation of data (Guthrie and Thyne, 2006). Although there is concern amongst qualitative researchers that the use of computers for data analysis is detrimental to the researcher’s closeness to the data (Coffey *et al.*, 1996), the researcher was able to easily retrieve and code text into segments. The software’s sophisticated tools allowed for hyperlinks to be created between documents for clearer classification systems, and links and connections to be made between themes (Guthrie and Thyne, 2006). The use of hyperlinks enables researchers to go back and forth between the context and the coded text (Lee and Esterhuizen, 2000). Doing so avoided the ‘coding trap’, where researchers become

overwhelmed with coding and lose sight of the bigger picture (Bazeley, 2007; Bazeley and Jackson, 2013).

Upon completion of the analysis of the data, the interpretations were shown and presented to two of the key informants, Michael and John, as part of the member check. Once a sufficient amount of data analysis had been conducted and data collection was complete, a Skype interview was arranged with Larry. The general manager of the community was given the analysis chapter to read and comment on, as the document provided insights into the findings of the study. The member-check process was carried out in order to achieve maximum trustworthiness (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). To ensure that the interpretations made were representative of the virtual community, the researcher consulted Michael throughout the life of the study to clarify any issues and questions.

5.6 Issues of Validity and Reflexivity

Traditionally, terms such as validity have been linked to positivist, scientific and quantitative studies; there has been limited discussion about issues concerning validity in ethnographic research (Lecompte and Goetz, 1982; Kirk and Miller, 1986). According to Brewer (2000), validity refers to the extent to which the data is accurately presented. Although external validity is not relevant to netnography due to netnography's naturalistic research inquiry, it does have significant relevance to this study, as it is viewed as data linked to relevant theoretical knowledge.

Validity concerns description and explanation and is closely linked to reflexivity. Part of one criterion for validity is engaging in reflexivity; the researcher was open to

alternative interpretations of the data. Consistent with existing explorations into reflexivity (Wallendorf and Brucks, 1993; Thornton, 1997), the researcher found reflexivity essential during the data-collection process. Reflexivity affects the way in which data is understood and how it is collected. In order to be reflexive when taking on the role of an ethnographer, the researcher *'does not merely report findings as facts but actively constructs interpretations or experiences in the field and then questions how these interpretations actually arose'* (Berg and Lune 2012, p.205). The researcher's reflexivity accepts that knowledge cannot be separated from the knower; therefore, the researcher must be aware of his or her effect on the process (Steedman, 1991). As a result, the reflexive approach provided insights into the case study of WatchZone and how the knowledge and theory emerged.

By acting reflexively, the researcher continually examined her actions and her role within the research process; thus, reflexivity and the process of writing up the research were inseparable. Brewer (2000) recognises that reflexivity and interpretation are tied, acting as a link between interpretation and the process of conveying the data. When considering ethnographers, reflecting on the research site and its social processes influences the data. This reflexivity impacted the process of writing up the research, the status of the data, and the researcher's own standing and authority.

The differences between 'descriptive' and 'analytical' reflexivity are highlighted by Stanley (1996). The former refers to factors such as the description given to the social setting (Wallendorf and Brucks, 1993), any preconceptions the researcher may have, power relations amongst community members, and types of interaction

between the researcher and the participants. Descriptive reflexivity required a critical attitude towards the data, and provided a realistic foundation for the study. On the other hand, analytical reflexivity is considered as a more thorough technique because it deals with epistemological matters and knowledge claims. By engaging in this type of reflexivity, the researcher reflected on how understanding and interpretation were reached, and whether any preconceptions had changed throughout the course of the study.

5.7 Summary

This chapter focused on the implementation of the methodology in order to achieve the proposed contributions to knowledge. Firstly, a netnographic approach was taken to studying the interactions of members and network development in a virtual watch-collector community, accompanied by a range of data-collection methods. In line with an interpretivist philosophical stance, the phenomenon under investigation was studied in its natural setting, WatchZone.

Over an 18-month period the researcher examined the interactions, members and networks in WatchZone, as well as the unique characteristics of the community. Through a netnographic research design, the researcher actively participated in WatchZone as a member in order to further legitimise the interpretations made. A netnographic research design has been an ideal methodology to explore interactions and networks in a virtual setting, as it has allowed for an immersive approach to data collection, resulting in in-depth descriptive accounts of data. Furthermore, netnography has been particularly effective in studying a type of virtual community – a virtual collector community – about which there is little existing knowledge.

Chapter VI

The Unique Characteristics of WatchZone

6.1 Introduction

This first chapter of analysis reports the findings on the characteristics of WatchZone. Addressing the first research question of the study, details of WatchZone's different types of discussion forums and platforms are provided, with specific interest in the types of interactions that occur.

The following section focuses on the characteristics of WatchZone and their influence on the interaction between members. The characteristics that emerge are: (1) shared emotional connections, (2) membership, boundaries, belonging and group symbols, (3) enforcing and challenging norms, and (4) the exchange of support.

Please note that the excerpts from online discussions, blogs and emails interviews used throughout the analysis chapters have been taken directly from the collector community; therefore, the typos and spelling errors were made by the discussants and have been left intentionally. The transcribed text such as excerpts from Skype, FaceTime and in-person interviews have been transcribed word for word; grammatical errors, repeated words and fillers have been left in.

As mentioned previously, pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of participants and the community. Please refer to appendix 5 for information about the interview participants and to appendix 6 for information about the discussants. The term participant refers to the interviewees, whilst the term discussant refers to members contributing to online discussions across WatchZone forums.

6.2 WatchZone Forums and the Nature of Exchange

WatchZone consists of forums relating to specific luxury watch manufacturers, high-end luxury brands, automotive manufacturers, and a forum for off-topic issues (see table 6.1). Visitor numbers range from 350,000 to 500,000 per month. The range of social sites within the virtual community encourages different types of exchange. The analysis of reveals that WatchZone is utilised by it's members as an information source to assist with their collecting activities.

Table 6.1. Types of WatchZone Forums.

Forum (total number of forums)	Details	Type of Platform
Watch manufacturer/brand-specific (23)	Each of these forums are based on luxury-watch manufacturers or brands. Examples include: Patek Philippe, Rolex, Montblanc and Omega.	Electronic forum
The Independent forum (1)	A forum to facilitate discussions about watches made by independent watch manufacturers.	Electronic forum
Horological Meandering (HoMe) (1)	A forum based on general horological and watch-related topics that are not specific to a brand.	Electronic forum
News Central (1)	News about the latest developments in the horological world. The moderators control the content on this site; other participants are not able to respond to posts or comment on the articles.	Blog (without feedback facility)
Baselworld and SIHH (1)	Reviews of the watch conventions are uploaded. The site does not have a facility for comments and questions to be posted. This forum is usually most active in the lead-up to the convention and after it, as participants discuss their experiences and the watches that were showcased there.	Blog (without feedback facility)
Automotive (1)	An automotive forum was set up because moderators of the community found that members were often interested in cars as well as watches. The automotive forum is not dedicated to a specific car manufacturer, although most discussions are centred on supercars.	Electronic forum
TimeOut (1)	This forum covers a range of topics, such as travel, technology and food. Participants, who are free to discuss any topics within the community guidelines, lead the forum.	Electronic forum
Chinese Digest (1)	This blog caters for the Chinese participants, as the watch reviews are written in Chinese. This section does not allow comments and questions to be posted.	Blog (without feedback facility)
WristScan (1)	The sole purpose of this forum is for participants to upload pictures of their watches and collections. Each week a theme is chosen, either by moderators or participants, and pictures are then posted based on that theme.	Blog
Collector's Market (1)	This platform is a facility to bring together buyers and sellers. Sellers post details of the watches they wish to sell, allowing buyers to search for watches they wish to add to their collections. WatchZone charges a fee for each transaction made via Collectors Market.	Buyers' and sellers' forum
Watch Tech (1)	Participants are able to post technical questions about watches on this forum. This forum is not brand-specific; thus, moderators may also post information on the mechanics of watches.	Electronic forum

As with many virtual communities, the exchange of information is central to participation. The News Central forum provides members with the latest developments in the watch-manufacturing industry. Unlike other WatchZone forums, News Central is a blog where members are unable to comment; rather, moderators post press releases, community announcements and reports regarding luxury-watch conventions. The purpose of News Central is summarised by James; an amateur collector:

They [moderators] come back with reports say from Basel World...they do this real extensive report with photographs, and it's about community stuff like this morning I read we have a new moderator (James, Skype interview).

The diversity of the membership and interactions is most noticeable on the Horological Meandering forum, known as HoMe. WatchZone demonstrates more than the mere transmission of information; it draws members together who share an interest in horology and watch-collecting. During an interview, Hans observes the following behaviour:

I tend to believe, that many on [WatchZone] members are real information junkies. Better too much than too little 😊.

Contrary to the findings of previous studies, which focus on online community members as consumers, and the desire for consumers to acquire consumption-related information through virtual community participation (Kozinets, 1999), HoMe is considered as a place where all types of members (i.e. collectors, watch dealers, and watch brands) gather to discuss horology-related topics.

Whilst the HoMe forum attracts a variety of members and covers a number of topics, the brand/manufacturer forums involve the exchange of brand-specific information. Similar to brand communities, such brand forums transcend geographic boundaries, and participants demonstrate brand loyalty through rituals and traditions centred upon the shared consumption experiences with the brand (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001). Larry discusses his participation in the Omega brand forum:

Well, I'd ask questions about watches and I'd get a lot of input, but I also found that the moderators of each of the individual forums happened to be pretty much experts. Say, the moderator of the Omega forum, you know, he moderates and makes sure that the advice are in counsel that people give on that site are accurate (Larry, Skype interview)

Extant research into brand communities focuses on the important connection consumers feel with the brand and with one another (Cova and White, 2010; Willi *et al.*, 2013). For WatchZone, watch dealers and brand representatives are an integral part of the member population. The exchange of information is legitimised as individuals and business users share their expertise, demonstrating cooperation through sharing brand stories.

The majority of WatchZone forums are related to a particular brand or manufacturer, where the exchange amongst participants involves both informational and social in orientation. Members also exchange and sell their watches through the Collector's Market. Members are able to post sale adverts on the Collector's Market as well as browse watches for sale. Due to the high proportion of counterfeit watches and the large amounts of money transferred, trust between buyers and sellers is essential. Furthermore, the accuracy of the details of the watch (such as its condition), along with the timescales agreed for money transfers, demonstrates that exchange partners

must not only trust one another, but also the security of the WatchZone. Whilst being interviewed, Ken discusses his experience and use of the Collector's Market:

Some of the watches I do sell, I list on there. I listed one on there, my Nouvelle Horlogerie Calabrese² by Vincent Calabrese³. It was an all-black one, lovely it was, listed that on there, and within two hours, by mate Kevin in Australia had brought it for the asking price [...] Here's the money in the bank, there, done. Job done (Ken, Skype interview)

As the Collector's Market brings together buyers and sellers, users enter into product, service, informational and financial exchange. Thus, WatchZone members might initially be attracted to WatchZone to seek information from other individuals, but are also able to interact with business users, engage in dialogue to exchange, buy and sell watches, and participate in socially orientated interactions. For example, the off-topic forum, TimeOut encourages social interaction; here, members often share more personal information, outside of their collecting activities and interest in luxury watches. Observations have revealed that members who are more involved in the community tend to use TimeOut to discuss a range of issues such as their family, work, health and technology. As the forum does not have an official moderator, members are able to freely discuss topics within a semi-public platform, whilst ensuring they keep to the community code of conduct (see appendix 7 for the WatchZone code of conduct).

² Nouvelle Horlogerie Calabrese is a watch model, also known NHC.

³ Vincent Calabrese is a Swiss independent watchmaker.

6.3 Shared Emotional Connections

The analysis has revealed that WatchZone has similarities with virtual communities of consumption: a group of individuals who participate online based on a shared passion for and knowledge of a consumption activity (Kozinets, 1999). In the case of WatchZone, members gather because of a shared interest in luxury watches, horology and collecting behaviour. The shared emotional connections take three inter-related forms: (1) an overall shared enthusiasm for horology and luxury watches, (2) a shared passion for a certain watch manufacturer, brand or type of watch, and (3) sharing a role or status with other members.

Firstly, an overall emotional connection with horology and watch-collecting is evident in the entire community. For collectors, their collections and acquiring new watches are seen as achievements. WatchZone provides a platform to share these achievements. When asked during an interview what it means to be a WatchZone member, a key informant, Michael offers the following response:

My immediate thought is that it means that I am a welcomed member of one of the warmest and most knowledgeable communities to be found anywhere, online or off. I have a few posts here and there on other sites, but this is by far my home. This sense of community makes sharing a natural outcome (Michael, in-person interview).

Sharing stories relating to collecting activities is an important method of creating and maintaining the community: the story-telling acts as a common experience and links members together.

Secondly, there is a shared emotional connection between members who are passionate about a certain type, manufacturer or brand of watch. Unlike a brand

community that is considered to be a specialised online gathering '*based on a structured set of social relationships among users of a brand*' (Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001, p. 412), WatchZone is not dedicated to a single brand or watch manufacturer, but consists of many forums that are specific to watch manufacturers and brands. Consequently, networks of members form based on shared a connection with a particular watch brand or type of watch. For example, some members share an interest in diving and collect diving watches, and this network arranges face-to-face meetings centred upon diving. Another kind of shared emotional connection is illustrated by members who collect a particular brand of watch. There is a clear sense of passion for horology, and a close affiliation with one brand. The collecting preferences of these members impacts which forums they decide to participate in and the networks of members they choose to interact with.

Finally, the shared emotional connection is also developed based on the role and status of a member. The moderators of WatchZone are not only bound by their shared passion for luxury watches, but by their shared role. During an interview, Donna, the only female moderator, referred to her role in the community as similar to that of a 'sheriff'. The team of moderators deal with the day-to-day running of the community by working together to govern the forums with the shared aim of implementing the code of conduct in a consistent manner. The network of moderators also provides watch manufacturers and brands with feedback from the communal discussions.

6.4 Boundaries, Belonging and Group Symbols

The clear communal boundaries create a sense of belonging for WatchZone members, as a network of luxury-watch consumers, collectors, watch dealers, watch manufacturers and brands. WatchZone is regarded as an internationally renowned community, as the management team and members are geographically dispersed. WatchZone's international scope is reflected in Andy's observations of the locations of moderators:

I think [WatchZone] is one of the most international of the horology sites, like TimeZone is very North American focused, we have actually tried hard to make sure we have an international membership, where our membership is pretty much equally spread across America, Asia, Europe, I'll include Australia with Australasia, and the moderators have been chosen to... because they're in different countries, so the most recent one is in South America (Andy, FaceTime interview).

Despite the international scope of WatchZone, clear communal boundaries are created; this is particularly evident between registered members and non-members. As the content of WatchZone is semi-public, restricted access is given to non-members: they are able to read reviews of watches, but cannot partake in discussions. Registered members are given exclusive access to developments in the luxury-watch manufacturing industry.

During the data-collection phase, the researcher became a registered member and created a member profile (see illustration 6.1). Many members (individuals as well as business users) create avatars to protect their identity; thus, constructing an online name and uploading a picture that is a graphic representation of themselves. The fact that people must create an account in order to become a registered member of

WatchZone, along with the restricted access given to the general public, demonstrates that there are clear community boundaries.

HOROLOGICAL MEANDERING: myView | List All | Most Recent New : (posts) * | FAV ✓ | Gallery

User Details

Nav

Send Private Message (PM)

>> Show all Posts

>> Show User Gallery

>> References

Name:

Profile:

State:

Country: United Kingdom

Last: United Kingdom

Posts: 25

Residence:

Set Avatar **new**

Forum Post Titles (Threads)	Show Replies new	Views	Forum	Date
1. Craftsmanship!		(170)	Horological Meandering	Oct 9th, 2013,01:34
2. :-o	1	(24)	Rolex	Mar 1st, 2013,01:30
3. Rolex Named as the UK's Favourite Superbrand	2	(236)	Rolex	Feb 25th, 2013,09:19
4. Eric Clapton's PP for sale - Wow!	2	(1170)	Patek Philippe	Sep 28th, 2012,01:34
5. Lovely pictures Nicolas...	1	(50)	JLC	Sep 4th, 2012,10:49
6. Yup... dreaming of a Reverso		(36)	Horological Meandering	Aug 19th, 2012,06:23
7. Thanks:-)	1	(32)	JLC	Jul 18th, 2012,03:23
8. Love at first sight with a Reverso	2	(574)	JLC	Jun 25th, 2012,14:06
9. Love it!!!	1	(17)	JLC	Jun 25th, 2012,13:40
10. I know...	1	(40)	Horological Meandering	Jun 13th, 2012,01:56
11. Had a great time...	1	(38)	Horological Meandering	Jun 5th, 2012,04:16
12. Yum	1	(13)	TimeOut	May 16th, 2012,12:15
13. yes [nt]		(21)	Horological Meandering	Apr 26th, 2012,05:48
14. Good times		(11)	Horological Meandering	Mar 22nd, 2012,14:15
15. Love the advertising campaign		(53)	Bulgari	Mar 21st, 2012,09:23
16. Very informative :-) [nt]		(26)	Roger Dubuis	Mar 18th, 2012,16:09
17. Yes! Count me in! [nt]	1	(14)	Horological Meandering	Mar 3rd, 2012,09:07

Collectors Marketplace

Featured Collection

FS Gustafsson & Sjögren +
Nordic Seasons - Winter Nights for Purists -
limited edition of 10 pieces

FS PuristSPro ABR +
All-Black Rescue watch - we have some left!

[Visit the Collectors Market](#)

SITE: Horological Meandering

>> HOROLOGICAL MEANDERING - MASTHEAD

>> NEW START PAGE **new**

>> FORUM - Original View

>> FORUM - Most Recent Threads

>> BLOG

>> GALLERY

>> Previous Home Page **old**

->Horological Meandering on Twitter

->PuristSPro on Twitter

->See All Twitter Links

->Subscribe to our RSS feeds

Posts

- All Posts
- Report of the Bell & Ross cocktail at the Invalides

Illustration 6.1. Researcher's WatchZone Member Profile Home Page.

WatchZone members are distinguished from other watch networks by the use of vocabulary and symbols that represent the culture of the network. One example is the name 'Purist' given to members of WatchZone. During a discussion initiated by a moderator, members were asked to describe themselves; although the question was based on how they describe themselves as watch enthusiasts and collectors, many responses were centred upon the notion of belonging to the community. Tony specifically distinguishes WatchZone from other communities in the following way:

[T]he reason why I think it's like that is because of the demographics of our site... it's because the vast majority of people make a lot of money – they are affluent, and I find that people who make a lot of money, who are middle

class or upper middle class, they have better, umm – just my opinion – I feel they have better decorum. They have better respect for people and, you know, people who don't make that much money, in general from my experience, are people who are rowdy on the websites... people who don't make as much money (Tony, Skype interview).

It is clear that many members feel a sense of affiliation with, and belonging to, WatchZone. Members especially differentiate themselves from other community members through their orientation towards high-end luxury watches, rather than mainstream luxury brands. Such consumption behaviour and preferences reflected in member demographics suggest that there is a certain level of exclusivity and superiority amongst members who are only concerned with the most prestigious and luxurious watch brands.

Group symbols play a central role in the distinctiveness of WatchZone membership. A tangible group symbol is the watch known as the All-Black Rescue Watch, which was created by the St Gallen Horology Company⁴ especially for WatchZone members (see appendix 8). In this instance, the individual users (such as the WatchZone management team and community's world-renowned collectors) worked alongside business users (representatives of the watch manufacturer) to commission the exclusive Purist watch. As the watch is based on the ideals of disinfection, its primary target audience is members who are healthcare professionals, although it is also popular amongst the wider WatchZone network. Although a limited number of watches were made – 178 in total – these watches represent a symbol of membership.

⁴ St Gallen Horology Company Limited is a clockmaker and watchmaker. A renowned horologist who had links with the pharmaceutical industry founded the company. The company claims to have manufactured the first hygienic watch.

The exclusivity of the All-Black Rescue Watch is a mark of belonging to WatchZone; further adding to the exclusivity of membership.

Continuing with the theme of a sense of belonging, members pride themselves in their affiliation to WatchZone. During an interview, Ken, an Omega watch collector, offers an insight into WatchZone's reputation within the luxury-watch industry and what it means to be affiliated with WatchZone:

[I]f you go into a [luxury watch] boutique somewhere in most, in nearly any city, in nearly every city in the world, and say, 'Hi, I'm from the [WatchZone] forum' they will treat you like a goddess...they will. Look what they do for you, look what they did for us that day – champagne, wine, lunch, canapés and chocolates (Ken, Skype interview).

Membership of WatchZone creates a sense of identity, and gives credibility to members when they pursue their collecting activities, such as visiting luxury-watch boutiques⁵. The motivation for participating in the WatchZone network is also linked to the benefits members gain, such as information to assist with growing and maintaining their collecting interests.

6.5 Enforcing and Challenging Norms

WatchZone, similar to other virtual communities, is synonymous with low entry and exit barriers. Individuals are able to join WatchZone (by creating member accounts), participate in the various forums, and freely leave the community. As noted by de

⁵ The researcher attended an annual WatchZone get-together in London as part of the data-collection process. The get-together with other WatchZone actors was hosted by a number of luxury watch boutiques (also known as authorised dealers). Attendees met with the senior management team of two luxury-watch manufacturers, who took watch enthusiasts and collectors for lunch and closed their London boutiques to showcase the newest watch models and inform attendees of their manufacturing techniques.

Valck (2007), if a member of an online community does not agree with the communal code of conduct, the easiest option is to refrain from participating and leave the community. The majority of WatchZone members are individuals, where communal discourse is centred upon watch-collecting. Collectors might complete their watch collections, lose interest in watch-collecting, or join other virtual communities. Thus, WatchZone is characterised as an environment of dynamic interaction, where network members change over time.

The dynamic and complex nature of the WatchZone network is further increased by the anonymity of the Internet. There is a constant risk of troll behaviour, as members are able to post inappropriate comments; however, the self-policing nature of WatchZone, along with the moderator team, minimises such behaviour. The relatively anonymous nature of virtual community participation may reduce inhibition, conformity, and feelings of accountability (Baumeister, 1982; Prentice-Dunn and Rogers, 1989). The vast majority of WatchZone members adhere to the communal code of conduct, where a communal culture as developed through self-policing of the forums. Discussant 1 posts his view in a discussion thread on the issue of self-policing:

The Internet, and even our community here, are interesting places. On the one hand, methinks it is critical to allow the member of the forum to “self police” behavior that is not in keeping with the norms of the community - on the other hand, this self-policing can at times take a form that is more vigorous and less civil than we in this forum find to be desirable. And, as you note, the intervention of moderators is the least desirable, and perhaps ultimately self-defeating, form of boundary management that a forum can have (Discussant 1).

The self-policing nature of WatchZone is particularly evident in the Collector's Market. As counterfeit watches are good replicas of authentic pieces, members must utilise the skills and expertise of the community. There is little tolerance of the sale of counterfeit watches: this behaviour leads to member accounts being blocked by the management team. The enforcement of the WatchZone code of conduct, along with its self-policing environment, gives a shared objective and strong sense of community in the network. As Tony states during an interview, individuals take it upon themselves to monitor forums for counterfeit watches and dishonest members. An excerpt from the interview follows:

[T]hey [members] want to make sure that one of their friends doesn't get scanned or ripped off by the fraudulent seller, so yeah...everyone is looking out for each other in the Collector's Market...We get a lot of posts on the Collector's Market, and we don't officially have any designated moderators on that forum, but a lot of the time our community is the one who actually enforces it (Tony, Skype interview).

Members work together to confront and chastise perpetrators, one example being the selling of counterfeit watches. Due to the high number of counterfeit luxury watches, there are concerns amongst members that attempts will be made to sell these watches via WatchZone.

Issues concerning governance and tensions amongst members are not restricted to WatchZone, but are evident in many types of communities (Harrison and Jenkins, 1996). In fact, these tensions and variety of behaviours becomes part of the communal culture. The self-policing of the community, along with the impartial stance taken by moderators, is seen as an attractive online environment for watch collectors and enthusiasts to interact in.

The emergent characteristics demonstrate the complexity of WatchZone both in terms of structure and communal activities. This multi-brand community brings together high-end luxury watch brands and manufacturers that would otherwise be competitors into a consumer-led setting where each forum adheres to the same WatchZone governance policies. While the appeal of the high-end luxury watch is a specialist interest, the various brand and manufacturer forums cater for a range high-end luxury watches preferences. The uniqueness of this multi-brand community is reflected in the brands ability to work together in many instances such as holding exclusive WatchZone member events, whilst being direct competitors.

While much of consumption community research has focused on consumers gathering and interacting within single brand communities, WatchZone is somewhat unique. However similarities can be drawn with nature of exchange when exploring other groups of collectors such as car collectors. When studying a group of MG car collectors, Leigh *et al.*, (2006) found that collectors shared details of pursuit for restoring and maintaining a vehicle and stories of regarding their MG car club tours. The clear communal boundaries within collector communities such as WatchZone and the MG car collectors studied by Leigh *et al.* (2006) are defined by the sense of belonging that emerges as community members gather objects for their collections to achieve entry into their social group of similarly-minded people. While the group symbols are specific to the community, they serve as a religious and sacred object, in the case of WatchZone, the St Gallen watch exclusively commissioned for WatchZone assists to maintain a sense of belonging.

The four characteristics associated with WatchZone parallel many subcultures of consumption as the community experience is differentiated by roles and mastery. However within a collector community this differentiation between roles and mastery is heightened, as collections become a signal of connoisseurship. Collecting behaviour is often associated motives for self-enhancement such as ‘seeking power, knowledge, reminders of one’s childhood, prestige, mastery and control’ (Belk, *et al.*, 1998, p.550). Thus, a members role and motives for enforcing and challenging communal norms may also be relevant in other collector communities such as amongst stamp, art and car collectors.

6.6 Summary

The analysis has uncovered that the characteristics of WatchZone have a significant impact on how interactions take place, what is being exchanged, and how networks of members are developed and sustained.

The nature of the exchange that occurs is determined by the forum and its associated communal activities and results in a diverse range of information, social and financial interactions. . WatchZone is a multi-purpose virtual community offering its members watch-related brand/manufacture forums, and assisting members to develop trusting networks of collectors and business users and ultimately relationships that benefit collections and collecting activities.

The virtual interactions are based on three types of emotional connection: (1) the overall shared enthusiasm for luxury watches, (2) a shared passion for a specific

watch manufacturer, brand or type of watch, and (3) shared roles in the online community.

The clear communal boundaries between registered and non-registered members creates a sense of affiliation amongst geographically-dispersed users. Exclusivity through group symbols (e.g. the Purist watch) and access to information, as well as the shared interest in high-end luxury watches, differentiates WatchZone members from members of other watch-collecting communities.

By engaging in dyadic informational and social exchange, and being an active part of the network, members are able to develop direct connections with the wider luxury-watch manufacturing industry. Issues concerning governance and WatchZone as a support mechanism also influence and shape the interactions that occur. The self-policing nature of the forums brings together the community when members fail to adhere to the code of conduct.

Chapter VII

Heterogeneous Virtual Community Members

7.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the assemblage of heterogeneous members in WatchZone. The individuals (i.e. collectors and consumers) and business users (e.g. individual and authorised watch dealers, watch brands such as Omega, Patek Philippe, and independent watch manufacturers) all take on a variety of roles and differ in how they interact.

The following section reveals the diverse motivations for joining and participating in the community and how the shared interest in horology and collecting luxury watches affects their membership.

As the majority of WatchZone members are consumers and collectors, the analysis primarily focuses on members as luxury-watch collectors. The final section of this analysis offers a categorisation of collectors based on their collecting behaviours and motives reflected in their participation in WatchZone.

7.2 Member Diversity and Motives

The analysis has identified various categories of members within WatchZone. For example, there are individuals who participate as a result of their interest in horology and watch-collecting; watch dealers; business users who assist people to source watches; and watch manufacturers. These members range from independent luxury

watchmakers to international luxury watch brands. Finally, there are the moderators and general managers of the community. There are two key categorises of members within WatchZone consisting of significant variation and diversity:

- individuals interested in luxury-watch collecting and horology; and
- watch manufacturers, high-end luxury brands, authorised watch dealers, and independent watch dealers.

These categorises are not mutually exclusive, as a member might belong to more than one member group. The multiple roles and positions of members creates complex web of relationships and interactions in WatchZone. For instance, a member might be an individual who collects luxury watches as well as being a representative of a watch manufacturer; therefore, that person is an individual and a business user. The analysis reveals that each type of member differs in their membership motives and reasons to participate in WatchZone discussions and activities (see table 7.1 for a summary).

Table 7.1 Summary of Member Motivations.

Member Type	Quotation	Motivations
Non-Collectors	‘This place is really cool! All these guys know so much about the Omega Flightmaster...it’s like an Aladdin’s cave of info! I post a question and they respond straight away!’	Searching for information from a community of experts.
Collectors	‘Half of the excitement of collecting is searching for details, when you’re hunting, you’re hunting for the watch but you want the details and the stories behind the watch... then of course you have to come back and share your find.’	The community is seen as an integral part of collecting, where members exchange experiences, tell stories and return to share the details of the watch post-purchase.
Authorised watch dealers	‘I like to log on sometimes, we might get the odd time when one of our customers blogs about us and says we’ve offered good service and that’s always nice to hear, and you get to hear of the bad things but we will always try our best to make things right for them.’	The community discussions are a form of receiving feedback on in-store customer service.
Independent watch dealers	‘Sometimes you’ll read a post where someone has written ‘I want this, that and the other’ and then you think hold up I can help you, I think I know someone who is selling theirs’	Discussions lead to business opportunities for the independent watch dealers as they assist to source watches.
Independent watch manufacturers (e.g. Stepan Sarpaneva, Pascal Coyon)	‘This business is all about word-of-mouth, the hardcore lot won’t come near you if you haven’t been tried and tested, I mean I love what I do, but we’re not like the big boys.’	It is a platform to publicise the work of independent watch manufacturers and to become known amongst members.
Watch brands (e.g. Omega, Patek Philippe)	‘We never push our products, we don’t need to in this place, its not allowed anyway, for me I lurk, I sometimes might add my part and comments, but its just interesting for us to know what people are thinking, the comments and reactions to the new releases...the tributes and the old stuff.’	Discussions act as a source of feedback and allow for the buyers to communicate with the brands direct.

WatchZone is described by the General Manager as the *'fastest growing multi-brand high-end luxury watch forum for enthusiasts across the world'*; thus, it is primarily a venue to support interactions between luxury-watch enthusiasts and collectors rather than acting as a forum to facilitate communication between end users and watch manufacturers or brands. However, as the community has developed an international reputation across the high-end luxury-watch manufacturing industry, the presence of business users has grown. During an interview with a representative of a luxury brand, the researcher questioned the interviewee about his motivation for participation in WatchZone. The representative observes the following behaviours:

[T]hey [other members] love it when the independent watchmakers post, don't like anyone just pushing their own products... so there is a bit of a balance or a fine line there, but sometimes you'll see other brand executives and boutique dealers, the sellers try and get on and post to promote...we monitor our specialist forum every day, and we'll comment if something isn't right (Lloyd, Skype interview).

The motivation for business users, such as employees of watch manufacturers, is to gain feedback from end users of their products, as the discussions that occur on the WatchZone forums provide insights into customer opinions. This is consistent with Hagel and Armstrong's (1997) findings that virtual communities are often utilised by organisations in order to understand the product expectations of customers and whether these expectations have been met. Members recognise that business users lurk and monitor the forums, and as a result they often indirectly target discussions at manufacturers or brands. This was clearly demonstrated during a discussion on the forum dedicated to German watch manufacturer 'A. Lange & Söhne', where suggestions were made on changing the colour and size of the hands on one of the A.

Lange & Söhne watches. Discussant 2 responds: *'Your suggestion is very tempting, and i hope that someone from Lange might be reading this!'*

Whilst members offer feedback on ways in which manufacturers could improve their products, others use the forums to complain. The community forums serve as a platform for exchanging customer-service experiences and communicating directly with watch boutiques. One unhappy member concludes his blog by writing, *'I hope my AD [authorised watch dealer] is reading this'* or *'If [the watch manufacturer] is reading this'* (Discussant 1).

On a practical level, as collectors share experiences, the discussion forums provide a venue for obtaining feedback for brands and manufacturers. WatchZone allows for ongoing dialogue and interaction between individuals and manufacturers. Members are able to overcome geographical distance as they participate online via WatchZone forums, facilitating the development of networks consisting of individual and business users based around informational and social exchange.

However, not all individuals possess the same levels of participation and neither do they have homogeneous motives, as WatchZone serves multiple objectives simultaneously for different types of members. Through interactions and interviews with newbies, it was found that their participation in WatchZone was a result of their need for quality reassurance; therefore, they were motivated to participate to obtain information. Consider the comments made by an avid watch collector, Monty, whose expertise in Jaeger-LeCoultre watches is regularly sought by less experienced members:

At the [WatchZone] website there are a lot of people who have good education, we have you know, um, we have some common points of view about watches, about what we love, about what watches, about what we think about watches, about what we are looking for, and then the virtual turned into reality (Monty, Skype interview).

In line with the assertion made by de Valck *et al.* (2009), devotees of a virtual community are concerned with increasing '*their knowledge, to share experiences, or, simply, to express their interest in the community's subject matter*' (p. 189). From the perspective of a newbie, the researcher found obtaining the trust of other WatchZone members difficult. Unfamiliar with communal norms and rituals, newbies engage in superficial interactions; however, as the researcher experienced, by attending communal gatherings in person and regularly engaging in discussions, over time it is possible to progress from being a newbie to becoming a more recognised member.

Members also decide to participate in specific brand forums where, similar to brand communities, they want to become a part of the brand's symbolic function (Muñiz and Schau, 2005). Though members identify themselves as WatchZone members and 'Purists', whilst interacting in a particular brand forum, such as the Jaeger-LeCoultre forum, the community becomes a meeting place to express their devotion to the brand. Members of the Jaeger-LeCoultre forum often relive the brand and brand story when original watches are relaunched. Brand story-telling, such as the history of the Reverso watch by Jaeger-LeCoultre and its conception during the British rule of India, provokes nostalgia and hype. Similar to members of other brand-specific watch forums, owners exchange stories of how they acquired hard-to-find watches. In this regard, WatchZone prolongs the consumption experience for collectors as

members reminisce and return to the community to deliberate over their next purchases.

WatchZone provides a platform for joint consumption as the participation in the community becomes intertwined with the activity of consumption. Although collecting has been traditionally regarded an individual pursuit (Belk, 1995a; Long and Schiffman, 1997), WatchZone is place to share, show and discuss watch collections and collecting with like-minded individuals. The dark side of collecting reveals that collecting can become highly addictive and lead to uncontrollable collecting activities; however, WatchZone serves as a safe and trusted meeting place where members can share the positive and negative effects of collecting. Understanding the outcomes of collecting, such as the pleasure, the joys and satisfaction as well as its associated addiction, members are often motivated by the friendships that emerge. Paul's response to the question about his motivation to join WatchZone is as follows:

Oh, well, it's friendship. The motivation for the forum is having friends all over the world with a similar interest... I don't really care about what watch I'm going to buy – if they don't like it, they don't like it (Paul, Skype interview).

For some, membership is primarily associated with friendships centred upon a shared interest in luxury-watch collecting, but, interestingly, despite the obvious social desires that are fulfilled through participation, the opinions of others are not considered as important when making watch-related choices. The emergence of interpersonal relationships that are developed and maintained as a result of

participating in the community and sharing watch-related experiences is evident across the data, as Discussant 3 writes on the HoMe forum:

Without a doubt there are some people on this forum whom I've never met in person that know me better than people I am friends with in real life. I find this phenomenon interesting personally. I wonder if the setup of [WatchZone], or the type of people who participate here regularly have led to this result...Hard to say. I do think [WatchZone] is a unique place (Discussant 3).

Before joining, members often already demonstrate a passion towards their luxury-watch collection and actively search online for information related to their collecting activities. Thus, WatchZone's networks are established and formed based on the exchange of watch-related knowledge and expertise. Networks are underpinned by the shared interest in horology and develop as social bonds and friendships are created with like-minded others.

The communal role played by a member impacts their motives to participate, their interactions with others and networks formed. As members establish their online presence and identity by participating in communal activities, over time certain members are assigned or develop communal roles, such as gatekeepers, members of the WatchZone management team or moderators. The paid role of a moderator is summarised by Andy; the moderator for the HoMe forum:

So my role is really just to... well, it's several fold. One is to keep the peace, so I'm of a generator... keep things sort of looking good [...] my role is just to promote interest and discussion... of course you get to chat with reps from the big manufacturers, it's all pretty cool stuff (Andy, FaceTime interview).

Andy joined the community with a keen interest in vintage Omega watches, seeking information from and contributing regularly to the Omega and HoMe forums. His

motives to participate have diversified: the strong social ties with fellow members, forging of connections with business users and governing the main forum has led to the development of a micro-network. This network, which is part of the overall WatchZone network, draws together the insider knowledge Andy acquires through his role as moderator and connects a diverse range of users who are all interested in vintage Omega watches.

7.3 Members as Luxury-Watch Collectors

The majority of the members are categorised as high-end luxury collectors. From consumer-behaviour research, the term ‘collector’ refers to an individual who actively and passionately acquires and possesses products that are removed from their utilitarian function (Belk *et al.*, 1988; Formanek, 1991; Hogg, 2003). Although this definition of a collector offers an overview of collecting activities, the analysis uncovers that WatchZone consists of a range of collectors who are diverse in their activities, behaviours and participation in the community.

The idea that the network supports and is held together by the primary activity of gathering information for the benefit of luxury-watch collections is a reoccurring theme. An online poll carried out on behalf of the researcher by the General Manager asked ‘How did you stumble upon WatchZone?’ See illustration 7.1 for the responses from the poll.

POLL: How did you stumble upon

Date: Sep 11, 2012, 18:58 PM - ([view entire thread](#))

[Like](#) 0 [Tweet](#) 0



[Pin it](#) [Share](#)

We haven't had a poll in a while so thought I'd make a quick poll which everyone here can answer. I'm pretty sure we all know what will be the most common answer, but let's see if there are any surprises.

You must be logged into your watchprosite account to vote and see results!

Cheers,

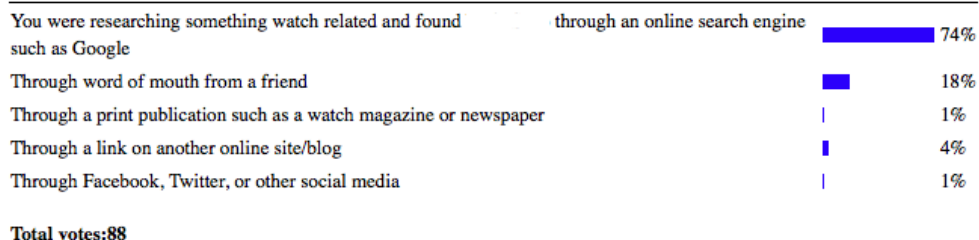


Illustration 7.1. Results from Poll Conducted by General Manager.

The results from the poll show that the majority of members partake in search behaviour as part of their interest in watches, and therefore found WatchZone by carrying out research on the Internet. When studying the behaviour of collectors, Storr (1983) found that the '*thrill of the hunt*' was the most enjoyable aspect of collecting. Pedro, a WatchZone member, recognises that a central part of collecting for WatchZone members is searching for watch-related information. During a Skype interview he was asked about the role of the community as part of the acquisition process. His response is as follows:

That's important. The exchange, the sharing and interaction is very, very important, its more than watches at the end but... sharing opinions, it's more than getting a watch or adding another watch to your collection [...] when you are a collector, at the moment you get the watch, you are running after another one... So it's a perpetual quest [...] its quite immediately (Pedro, Face Time interview).

In order to understand the motivations of WatchZone members, the researcher asked interviewees how their interest in luxury-watch collecting began; a common response involves the fascination with watches as a child. The responses of Monty, Mo, George and Michael to this interview question are similar:

Oh well... since I was five years old... because my father gifted me an old Timex, and so I was looking at my watch all the time, you know... Even at night, I was like 'ahhh', my watch was shining in the dark, so I went several nights without sleeping just to look at my watch, it's pretty crazy (Monty, Skype interview).

I've always liked watches. I remember my first ever watch when I was about 11. I had a Lucerne⁶ hand-wind and I used to wind it up every night like a good little boy (Mo, FaceTime interview).

[M]y grandfather was an amateur watch repairer and I certainly remember visiting him and looking at his workshop when I was... so I'm 50 now, so when I was probably 8–10 years old. I remember first seeing a ticking watch and the movements and the parts, so I was interested when I was less than 12 or 13 (George, Skype interview).

As far back as I can remember I was interested in watches. My Reconciliation, a Catholic Sacrament present from my grandfather was a two-tone bracelet digital Casio. As an early teen I remember lusting for pieces by Accutron⁷ and Swatch (Michael, in-person interview).

In line with the connection between collecting and childhood, watches are referred to as 'playthings' and 'toys', a reminder of collecting as a vehicle to fulfil childhood fantasies. The responses suggest that members are fulfilling childhood dreams

⁶ Lucerne is a Switzerland-based watch manufacturer.

⁷ An Accutron was the world's first electronic watch, made by Bulova, a luxury-watch manufacturer.

through watch-collecting, which is primarily considered as a self-indulgent activity. Psychoanalytic studies offer similar explanations of collecting, arguing that collectors seek psychological security as a result of deep feelings of insecurity from childhood (Muensterberger, 1994). The pleasure gained through collecting is made particularly evident in Ken's description, during an interview, of collecting luxury watches as a 'delicious torture'. When the interviewer probed Ken about this term, he said he was referring to the great joy he receives when searching and acquiring objects for his collection, but acknowledged the 'torture' as the financial burden of purchasing expensive items.

A sense of affiliation is created as members distinguish themselves from non-collectors. By differentiating themselves from non-collectors or normal consumers, their behaviour is legitimised and accepted as a 'norm' amongst the WatchZone network. One example of how WatchZone members are distinguished from non-collectors is that during a discussion about the use of celebrity endorsement when advertising luxury watches, the following response is a view held by many members:

Celebrity endorsements don't do anything for me...Maybe they may have an effect on non-WIS, but for us WIS, I don't think it has any effect IMO (Discussant 4).

There is a clear distinction between the behaviour of watch collectors (WIS) and non-watch collectors (non-WIS, also known as normal consumers). Unlike other consumption activities, collecting is primarily concerned with acquiring more of something (Brown, 1988). Members are able to relate to each other as they view themselves as different to non-collectors and 'normal customers'. Amongst members

there is a subtle sense of superiority over non-collectors when discussing the decision-making process. Discussant 5 observes the following influences during the decision-making process:

I suspect to the general public that sort of advertising can be persuasive... whether grounded in fact or not. [...] The decision to spend 4, 5 or 6 figures on a watch is generally a serious one for a "normal" person' (Discussant 5)

A sense of affiliation develops as many members display similar motivations to purchasing and goals, whilst recognising that their reasons for seeking information are fundamentally different to 'normal customers'. It is interesting that during this online discussion on decision-making there was limited reference to the influence that members have on each other. As WatchZone is primarily an information source that members use to grow and maintain their enthusiasm in watches, it would be difficult not be influenced by the discussions that occur. This influence can be as subtle as forming a relationship with a member who shares the same watch preferences, or whose watch collection is admired, or forming relationships with members who share collection motivations; for example, for investment purposes.

Discussant 6 uses humour to put across the point of influence in the community. He writes:

I highly value celebrity endorsements...And every Friday morning, at Wrist Scan, I re-connect with you, my honoured parade of celebrities (Discussant 6).

There is some truth in the comment made by Discussant 6, as members are not influenced by the marketing literature published by organisations. They are more concerned with a fellow collector's review of a watch, as they are respected by one

another for their knowledge of horology, the small details of watches and watchmaking. The use of the term ‘celebrities’ when referring to members suggests that the network consists of opinion leaders and experts, whose thoughts on watches are valued.

Interestingly, although members differentiate themselves from non-collectors, not all of the virtual-community participants consider themselves to be collectors. When asked how they would describe themselves, WatchZone members approached their answers in two distinct ways, discussing either: (1) how they describe themselves to non-collectors, such as friends or family, or (2) how they perceive themselves. Two excerpts from an online discussion thread reflect how many members view themselves and their collecting activities.

I keep it a secret... there is no point in explaining. At best, I would elaborate that I have looked at a few more watches than most people [...] Frankly, even today I am not sure why I am still at it?? A collector, no, just "an activity" to while away some free time (and costing me heck lots of money!) (Discussant 7).

I am a closeted watch collector [...] To most people, I never say I collect watches. Living in Indonesia, I don't want to show my wealth too much. The gap between rich and poor is wide here, and I don't think I need to aggravate the condition further (Discussant 8).

The above responses suggest that collecting luxury watches might be regarded as ludicrous, which is consistent with Belk (1995), who also found in his investigations that collectors occasionally feel ashamed of their collections. Through being part of the WatchZone network and participating in communal activities, members are able to freely discuss their collections and reveal their identity as a collector in an appreciative environment where collecting behaviour is understood.

The network of WatchZone collectors challenges the traditional view of a collection. According to Belk *et al.* (1988), objects in a collection are removed from their utilitarian status and are considered to have sacred or magical status, whilst the collection itself is 'organised'. The collected objects, along with this characteristic of a collection, differentiate this consumption activity from others, such as hoarding behaviour. When considering the characteristic of 'sacred and magical status' it would suggest that the object is not used, but simply stored and admired. However, members of WatchZone challenge this idea: many wear their watches, and regularly upload photographs of the watches being worn; therefore, the object is not removed from its utilitarian status.

There are members who do not view themselves as collectors. Discussant 9 is one example of this: *'I also try to avoid calling myself a "watch collector" as I don't have a large or systematic collection...'*. The point made by Discussant 9 about not having a 'systematic collection' is particularly interesting because it is in line with the view held by Clifford (1985) that a collection is an organised group of objects that have been acquired in an obsessive manner. This idea questions whether a collector is still a collector if they do not possess a systematic collection. Many members may not own a systematic collection of luxury watches, but simply purchase these objects to *'make themselves feel good'* or because *'I've worked hard, so why not?!'*. The term 'systematic' is rather ambiguous, as it could refer to collecting objects that share some similarity. There are many who collect only a particular style of watch (e.g. diving watches), those made by a certain watch manufacturer (e.g. Jaeger-LeCoultre), watches made in a particular year, or watches

that have a tourbillion⁸. Others collect a range of objects, such as watches, fountain pens, and automobiles; this could still be considered as a systematic collection as there is a common factor amongst the objects. Larry, a collector of watches, fountain pens and automobiles, points out during an interview that *'they are mechanically intricate and they're the... you know, the style, you know, the art, you know, I like the art of an automobile'*. Larry's array of mechanically intricate objects is still considered to be a collection.

It is clear that not all members consider themselves as collectors, but many possess the tendencies and behaviours of collectors. For example, Discussant 10 does not consider himself a collector, although his engagement in communal activities suggests otherwise. Discussant 10 regularly attends international watch exhibitions and watch boutiques in order to gain further knowledge of horology, as well as contributing to reports and news releases on new watches and the production methods. He also meets with other members at get-togethers, and regularly posts photographs from these events. Observations from the behaviour of Discussant 10 are common across the community and suggest that he might be in denial about his status as a watch collector. Members of the network are able to accept each other's compulsive behaviours, as they empathise with one another, whilst encouraging and appreciating their dedication to their collections. It is obvious that many members may not categorise themselves as collectors, as they do not feel that they have the traits of collectors or the systematic assortment of watches. During an online

⁸ A small rotating cage that houses the balance, hairspring and escapement. The rotation of the tourbillon effectively eliminates the pull of gravity on the accuracy of the watch.

discussion regarding how members make decisions on watch purchases, Discussant 11 explains his method of choosing which watch to purchase:

We obsess and compulsive read the forums like it is the bible...Then we get tons of others opinions, change our minds 2 million times, rationalize, dream, save, rationalize more. Finally to stop the pain we get something praying it is the Holy Grail, and if after hours, days, or months later it turns out not to be, we start the whole process over again. Fortunately I have been pretty pain free these last few years. It wasn't cheap, but I can say I have found the Holy Grail for now. (Discussant 11)

Responses to this particular post demonstrate that many members are able to relate to this activity, and admit to conducting vast amounts of research into technical aspects, such as watch movements, and watch complications⁹ as part of their hunt for watches. The terms 'obsess' and 'compuls[ive]' used in the above excerpt echo the findings from previous studies in collector behaviour. A common view held by academics researching the behaviours of collectors has found that they can become highly motivated to complete their collection, constituting a 'fix' and showing tendencies of addictive behavioural patterns (Pearce, 1994; Long and Schiffman, 1997). WatchZone allows members to share the experience of obsessing over intrinsic details of watches, as Discussant 12 writes:

I just had a lot of free time to inspect pretty much every single aspect of the watch. Although these issues are super minor, they have been bothering me the whole day... I just need reassurance that this isn't a real problem and I'm actually crazy (Discussant 12).

Members ponder over the smallest watch details, attempt to understand how watch mechanisms are made, and visit different authorised dealers, watch boutiques and

⁹ 'Watch complications' refers to special functions that the watch is able to perform and display.

watch conventions to get satisfaction. The informational exchange on the finer details of watches is a key part of the interactions in the network. As members are able to relate to each other by understanding the need to search for these small details, and their central part in watch-collecting, relationships develop as a result of the mutual interest.

Consistent with studies in collecting behaviour, there is a dark side to this consumption activity (Danet and Katriel, 1986; Nataraajan and Goff, 1992): members are aware that collecting luxury watches can become addictive. Interestingly, Discussant 13 discusses the link between his addiction to smoking marijuana and his addiction to watch-collecting. He recognises his self-imposed price limit when purchasing watches in relation to his addition to smoking marijuana, writing:

I repeatedly established limits/barriers for myself, with every intent of restraining myself accordingly, and I repeatedly breached my self-imposed barriers as my addiction evolved (Discussant 13).

His addition to watches began when he spent more than \$5000, which he thought he would never spend on an item. Discussant 13 recalls:

Yet, notwithstanding my initial conviction, my watch expenditures continued to gradually increase [to \$20,000 - \$30,000]. I quickly eclipsed each and every ceiling I artificially imposed on myself. A few days ago, I spent more than I have ever spent on a single watch. If you had asked me two years ago whether I would spend this amount on a watch, I would have responded with an emphatic 'no' and I would have meant it. Yet, two years later, I did it without remorse (Discussant 13).

This particular thread suggests that purchasing a watch can be considered as a crime where collectors act 'without remorse'. For members, collecting luxury watches is

associated with addiction; in the case of Discussant 13 he is unable to act rationally and cannot comply with his self-imposed limits. Members of the community often refer to these psychological limits, as collecting watches is considered to be a *'dangerous step by step game'* as members are able to empathise with one another as *'victims of the same phenomenon'*.

In keeping with the notion of WatchZone as a support group, for serious collectors the network resembles a watch version of Alcoholics Anonymous. Similar to addiction groups, members are able to protect their identity by creating online avatars should they wish to, and are able to share their 'addictions' with others experiencing the same behaviours. It is clear from online discussions that WatchZone acts as a safe haven where like-minded individuals can discuss their behaviours. However, unlike Alcoholics Anonymous, WatchZone members do not encourage each other to stop their addictions; rather, the community feeds those additions. Discussant 14 responds to the online thread he started, as he writes:

I've discovered that my [price] limit is often raised as I spend more time on [WatchZone] and other sites like it [...] we should be ready to consider we've got a problem there (Discussant 14)

The negative effects of collecting and the points at which members face a crisis as a result of their addictions assists with relationship development. This form of dialogue about the negative aspects of watch-collecting has led to the development of close relationships with others experiencing the same feelings. The addictive and obsessive aspects of collecting are seen as acceptable in the network. Members are supportive and understand the irrational behaviours associated with collecting, and as interpersonal relationships develop through participation in communal activities, they

encourage each other to continue to acquire watches. During an email interview, Wendy offers an example of a fellow member and friend encouraging the purchase of an Omega watch.

[Larry] kept pushing me, he likes to collect watches from around his birthday..1964. He said Wendy you need to get a 1952, I said [Larry] I'm not going to get started on collecting on a specific birthday, I said you know I'd get hooked, and I know what I'll end up doing, I know me (Wendy, email interview).

Larry not only suggested that Wendy should buy a watch made in a particular year, but also encouraged her to buy a watch brand she had not bought before. This type of interaction encouraged further usage of WatchZone, as Wendy then asked the network questions about Omega watches. The WatchZone network not only assisted Wendy to make her decision, but also allowed her to draw on the connections of fellow members, as she had the Omega serviced by a watchmaker recommended by Larry.

How relationships are formed, developed and maintained with others on the virtual community is influenced by the motivation for and process of collecting, the consequences of engaging in collecting behaviour, as well as the communal role assigned to the members. In collector communities, members will each have different motivations for collecting. The benefits as well as the problems associated with collecting lead members to develop relationships with others. It is evident that WatchZone members differ in their interest in collecting behaviours; this is reflected in the types of interactions and discussions that occur. The data has revealed a variety of collectors, ranging from watch enthusiasts who are just beginning their interest in watches to watch collectors. These collectors range from amateur collectors

participating in WatchZone to learn about the art of horology and watch collection to professional collectors who own luxury watches worth millions of pounds.

7.4 The Categorisation of Collectors

The analysis has uncovered that the collectors of WatchZone vary in their motivations for collecting, level of interest, and overall mode of collecting, ultimately impacting their participation in the community and interaction with others. Deeper coding of the data revealed five main categories of collectors, labelled as (1) the enthusiasts, (2) the amateurs, (3) the casual collectors, (4) the serious collectors, and (5) the professionals.

The Enthusiasts

Enthusiasts are members who are starting to build their luxury-watch collections; thus, they possess a superficial interest in the consumption activity and in the community. These members are considered as newbies, as they have recently joined WatchZone and do not fully understand the communal rituals, practices and traditions. Newbies will often begin actively participating with an introductory post. The below excerpt is an example of a typical introductory blog post from a newbie:

Hey guys! I'm new around here... My lurking days are over! It would be good to get your opinion on if I should get a Lange 1 or a Saxonia, I just can't decide...I am only just starting out, these watches are beauties!! Cheers, your bestowed fellow watch fan :) (Discussant 15)

Enthusiasts are often motivated to engage in informational exchange because they have relatively limited knowledge on luxury watches; WatchZone is, therefore,

regarded as a credible and independent information source. As the Enthusiasts participate, their understanding of the opinion leaders, the mavens and the gatekeepers develops. Over time, for enthusiasts, online discussions with more experienced collectors in WatchZone are considered to be vital. Participation in communal activities provides an ideal opportunity for the Enthusiasts to learn from others. Discussant 16, a watch enthusiast who recently joined WatchZone, responds to an invitation to a face-to-face gathering:

Count me in! I never met the Purists in person, it will be good to finally meet and a beer, I'm afraid I haven't got many watches so I'll be bringing the one I'm wearing on the day! Ciao (Discussant 16)

Enthusiasts such as Discussant 16 look to develop links with knowledgeable community members, such as avid collectors and watch dealers, to aid their collecting activities. Similarly, Long and Schiffman (1997), when studying the behaviours of Swatch watch collectors, found that less experienced individuals attend conventions and meetings to acquire information and build connections with more skilled collectors for the benefit of their collections.

The Amateurs

The Amateurs are primarily motivated by growing their collections and utilise the community as a key information source. Resources, such as the watch reviews written by the opinion leaders and experts in the community, are regarded as reputable and trusted, as Discussant 17 comments after reading a review of a newly released watch:

Thanks for the info! I didn't know the Tribute Reverso was out, I'm going to my AD [authorised dealer] to order mine! (Discussant 17)

During an interview, Monty, another amateur watch collector, is asked about the influence of celebrity endorsements. He offers the following response:

I am much more interested in the endorsements by Purists made here on the forums. These are opinions I value much more highly than some celebrity who probably knows little about watches (Monty, Skype interview).

The views of experienced collectors and members are considered to be more credible than the marketing material published by watch manufacturers. Interestingly, the amateurs considered the opinions of members who they often have never met as a more trusted information source than watch manufacturers, demonstrating that trust develops regardless of the interaction mode (i.e. online or offline). In WatchZone, relationships are created as members establish mutual respect for those who are considered to be more experienced in collecting.

An amateur collector's participation evolves over time, as their primary motivation for joining WatchZone is to enter into informational exchange in order to gather knowledge and specific details about watches they potentially wish to purchase. Social exchange and the development of friendship often is an outcome of participating in communal activities and attending face-to-face WatchZone gatherings. Larry is an example of an amateur watch collector, although his collecting behaviour is not restricted to watches; it also includes cars and fountain pens. The main purpose of his participation is to gather as much information as possible about the objects he collects; thus, he participates in many virtual communities. Whilst being interviewed, Larry comments on his collecting activities:

I've found out through all of my experiences, because I do automobiles, fountain pens, and watches, and there are a lot of sites that I visit. I call it 'playtime for me', and they all have something in common...they are mechanically intricate' Larry, Skype interview).

It is clear that amateur collectors, such as Larry, turn to more knowledgeable members for assistance when making decisions. Larry goes on to say:

I'm usually needing help with making a decision, so I turn to experts or people who know more about the particular watch I'm interested in (Larry, Skype interview).

In Larry's case, he has developed a network of members who guide him on which watches to purchase and make suggestions about which other watches he should purchase in line with his personal taste. Over time, Larry is able to offer assistance and share this expert knowledge with others in his network. Larry is a trained financial advisor; therefore, whilst members provide him with their knowledge and expertise on luxury watches, he privately offers financial advice to his friends within the community. Interview data reveals that informational exchange amongst members can extend well beyond horology and luxury watches, and includes members offering their personal services, often linked to their professions.

The Casual Collectors

The casual collectors are members who possess an interest in collecting, but are primarily concerned with the social aspect of interacting and meeting with like-minded individuals. The analysis reveals that casual collectors are motivated to add to their collections when '*you see someone else wearing the watch and it looks good on that person*' and '*you admire the watchmaker and want to support him*'

(discussant 5). Such responses demonstrate that although WatchZone is a platform to acquire horology-related knowledge, casual collectors primarily engage in social exchange. Philip offers the following explanation for joining WatchZone:

I wouldn't call it a motivation, it was coincidence. I got on the site [WatchZone], I saw everything, and the motivation to join, you fall into it... you fall in love... You do one post, um, I have maybe 4000 posts, 4790 posts [...] I just...I commented on the Patek¹⁰ forum, to a picture and I said 'that is... one amazing photo, you are lucky man' [...] I think I am a rather social user (Philip, Skype interview).

Early in his interview, Philip discusses his relatively low disposable income, restricting how far he can pursue his collecting activities. As collecting behaviour is primarily concerned with growing a collection through the continual process of acquisition (Belk *et al.*, 1995), Philip challenges this meaning of collector. Despite Philip's status as a casual collector, this has not prevented him from developing strong social ties with members who actively collect watches. Many members have created a primarily social network established on WatchZone by attending watch conventions and exclusive boutique events together, leading to the creation of long-term friendships.

The Serious Collectors

The serious collectors possess a playful attitude towards luxury watches as they are seduced by mechanical watch movements and the brand stories relating to the conception of the watches. These highly involved collectors are unconcerned with the opinions of others, and do not require assistance with decision-making. Serious

¹⁰ Patek is short for Patek Philippe.

collectors have a clear direction for their collections; thus, they do not use WatchZone to legitimise their collections or collecting behaviour, but as a platform to share their stories and experiences. Gary purchases a new watch every week and has a collection consisting of over 200 watches; he discusses the nature of his participation:

And I would never ask an opinion, although I did ask an opinion on a movement...That one was for the Dragon watch...I said 'quick opinion needed please, choice between this movement and that movement'... One was the automatic A Schild 1701 41 jewel¹¹ or I had the option of Fontainemelon 17 jewel, FHF 96 hand-wind¹² (Gary, Skype interview).

Serious collectors demonstrate high levels of mastery and connoisseurship through their collections. For serious collectors, the use of WatchZone involves seeking information about specific watch details. These groups of collectors post questions concerning specific technical watch information; thus, drawing from the networks the specialist expertise and capabilities of others. For serious collectors, interaction involves the exchange of expertise and knowledge. The interactions are often mutually beneficial, as members have different expertise about watch movements and watch manufacturers and rely on each other to share knowledge.

The Professionals

These members appear to be the elite collectors of the community, and pursuing collecting activities becomes a heroic mission for them. In the purest form, such members are highly selective, involving longitudinal acquisition and possession. The

¹¹ An 'automatic A Schild 1701 41 jewel' refers to a watch movement.

¹² A 'Fontainemelon 17 jewel, FHF 96 hand wind' is also a watch movement.

data reveals that possessing watches with high resale values, acquiring rare watches, and completing collections motivate the professionals. Contributing to an online discussion, Michael, a professional collector based in the UK, describes his collecting behaviour as follows:

I'm a professional collector...started collecting inexpensive vintage Rolex Oysters when Rolex Princes were beyond my budget. Moved on to vintage Rolex sports models as and when they came along. Gradually I gained a little more confidence to spend a little more on my watches. Then I opened a little watch shop to spread the love for vintage watches. And now the shop is just a front for my collection (Mike, FaceTime interview).

These members possess the dual role of collector and watch dealer, and are often situated at the centre of member networks as they assist others with sourcing watches. Economic motives, where the collected object is a form of investment, is a driving factor for participation, as there is a degree of financial return for the collector. The professionals invest significant amounts of money and time into collecting high-end luxury watches; however, the notion that the passion for collecting can also be profitable is a common observation (Bryant, 1989; Belk, 1995a). In this regard, the professionals consider collecting as a legitimate business activity.

As the professionals share their collecting stories, they are also serving the community. Writing reviews and offering commentary on the developments in the luxury-watch manufacturing industry is considered as a central part of being a professional collector and member of WatchZone. Discussant 18, a moderator for the Jaeger-LeCoultre forum and a professional collector, responds to comments on his recent watch review:

It was a lot of pleasure to prepare and write this post... any of them [the watches] will give you a lot of pleasure... I feel its my duty to share these beauties with you. So don't worry, you can't go wrong here [...] thanks for your nice words (Discussant 18).

The network of Purist members encourages voluntary behaviours as collectors support less experienced collectors, and provides companionship. The professional collectors and others in the network are regarded as an appreciative audience and receive much delight from showing each other their new acquisitions.

7.5 Summary

The data reveals that WatchZone consists of a heterogeneous network of members that brings together geographically-dispersed collectors, manufacturers, brands and watch dealers. Each type of member has different motivations for membership, such as acquiring information to build collections, establishing companionship, gaining customer feedback, or for business opportunities.

The majority of members are primarily regarded as collectors, as they actively engage in the selective accumulation of luxury watches where each purchase contributes to the collection. However, a complex network of members is uncovered, as collectors vary in their levels of interest and participation in the community.

The collectors of WatchZone can be categorised into five distinct typologies: (1) the enthusiasts, (2) the amateurs, (3) the casual collectors, (4) the serious collectors, and (5) the professionals. The collector categories vary in collectors' motivations for joining the community and how they form and maintain connections with others. For example, the enthusiasts are concerned with acquiring knowledge from more skilled

collectors and primarily participate for the benefit of their collections, whilst the professionals impart their expertise, showcase their collections and build networks for profit.

Chapter VIII

Consumption, Cooperation and Conflict

8.1 Introduction

This analysis chapter focuses on the interplay between WatchZone members and the communal activities, and the heterogeneous role of the community for its members: the individual and business users. Drawing from IMP research, this analysis chapter focuses on broad issues such as cooperation and conflict amongst the WatchZone network, however successive phases of analysis reveals that the network dynamics is shaped by the consumption behaviour; collecting luxury watches and associated communal practices. The first section examines how this internationally renowned network is developed and sustained through supportive and cooperative behaviours.

After that, the chapter uncovers the development of trust through participation in rituals, practices and activities directly related to horology and luxury-watch collecting that occur online and offline.

The chapter then reveals the sources of tension and the competitive behaviour that emerge as members engage in collecting activities. This is followed by analysis of a member's power and position and their influence on interactions with others in the community.

8.2 Communal Rituals, Traditions and Practices

Rituals, traditions and practices are evident across WatchZone. Some of these are widespread and understood by all of the community, whilst others are more localised

(i.e. specific to a brand, type of watch or geographical region) in their origin and application. These rituals, traditions and practices centre on a shared interest in luxury watches, collecting behaviour, or both. All the forums encountered in this study possess some sort of ritual, tradition or practice, occurring either online or offline. During a FaceTime interview with Matthew, a UK-based collector, he describes the communal activities after making a new acquisition:

Well, we always share the news of a new arrival... I've made reports on the watches, you make a little impression thing, you make a little photo shoot and then you give your opinion... it's part of the social network and then people are, like, 'Wow! Congrats, man' (Matthew, FaceTime interview).

In an offline setting, Belk *et al.* (1994) found that a central aspect of collecting behaviour involves adding to and developing the collection, as well as examining and organising the objects. In a virtual environment, the process of acquisition is shared with fellow collectors by uploading photographs, offering reviews and discussing the hunt for the object. This practice highlights the importance members place on acquisition, which is consistent with the notion that a key collecting activity is the actual process of searching for objects to add to collections (Lehrer, 1990). A common assumption is that the process of acquisition as well as possessing the object are of equal importance to collectors (Sherrell *et al.*, 1991; Belk, 1995a). For WatchZone members, collecting is a productive activity and an art that involves a sequence of multifaceted behaviours; Discussant 19 provides the following description of high-end luxury-watch collecting:

The "mystery of time" seemingly materialized on our wrists...The little elaborate machines, driven only by the force of a wound metal spring - mesmerizing. The stories behind our watches, be it an heirloom or the story about our "hunt" - emotionally touching (Discussant 19).

There are few other consumption activities that match the passion of collectors and their collecting behaviour, and WatchZone is often referred to as a ‘brotherhood’, offering an outlet for members to obsess and deliberate over which objects to add to their collections. Through to acquiring the watch by publishing a forum post, WatchZone members share their journey, from the initial desire to acquire a watch, to sharing details of the hunt. Trust develops between members as they participate through sharing details of their collecting journey. The acquisition of a ‘holy grail’ watch is considered as special and the highest achievement for collectors. Discussant 20, a serious collector based in China, responds to a question about whether ‘grail’ watches exist:

I was very lucky to get my holy grail early in my collecting life cycle... Back in 2006 I received my Three Gold Bridges¹³ after first seeing her in 2003 [...] I expect that 50 years from now the love affair will continue and no other watch will come close (Discussant 20).

Although Discussant 20 firmly believes that holy grail watches exist, others do not share the same views. Discussant 21, contributing to the same forum discussion, offers the following response:

[I]sn’t the point about the Holy Grail that it actually probably never existed The Holy Grail of watches for me is actually whatever watch i buy next. I cannot conceive of only owning one watch because each of them, in their own way, brings a uniqueness to my collection [...] So, i am actually not sure a true Holy Grail exists (Discussant 21).

As members comment and debate the existence of holy grail watches, across the community the collected objects are considered as sacred, possessing magical status

¹³ The Three Gold Bridges refers to a watch manufactured by Girard-Perregaux. The watch is known as ‘Three Gold Bridges’ as the dial has three signature-styled bridges.

and removed from the ordinary. This is amplified as members share their collecting behaviours when chasing watches that are out of reach. This is in keeping with existing collector-behaviour theory, which links the consumption activity to '*an organised obsession*' (Aristides, 1988), where collectors show signs of mastery and connoisseurship (Price, 1989).

There are numerous methods used to share details of their collections with fellow WatchZone members; one example is by participating in WristScan. Eric, an amateur collector, discusses his involvement in WristScan:

its sort of developed into a sort of photography competition and they actually have judges now. And there is a judge for static [...] and there is a judge for wrist scan, wrist shot, and then someone chooses the watch of the week. Then those three go on the HoMo page header, I think. And I've won quite [...] loads of times. My photography skills are shite...But I go and I put on some weird funky watch (Eric; email interview).

Examples of WristScan contributions are shown in appendix 9. Rigby and Rigby (1944) report that collecting is competitive in nature; in WatchZone this is heightened further, as the majority of members are males. WristScan insinuates the competitiveness, as members attempt to take the most unique, the most daring, and the funniest pictures. Such activities encourage interaction as members comment on the uploaded photographs, with business users utilising the WristScan submissions for their own print advertising campaigns.

WristScan offers members a sense of belonging. Relationships are formed with like-minded others who share a similar tastes and preferences, as the photographs are a reflection of a members' devotion to collecting. Interestingly, participation in Wrist Scan also reveals other hobbies, as the location or background of the photographs

shows that a member shares a passion for travelling or gardening, for example; thus, relationships formed with others often extend beyond a shared interest in collecting.

Through the involvement in communal activities, over time, members reveal more information about their collections, and their personal life. The tradition of ‘Purist of The Week’ (POTW) encourages members to discuss their collecting behaviour, and other pastimes. Andy describes POTW during an interview:

Knowing about an individual’s motivations and interests allow you to get the most from their musings about watches, life, the universe and everything (Andy, FaceTime interview).

By becoming POTW, the chosen member has their profile raised amongst the network. Although relationships are not specifically developed as a result of becoming POTW, it assists with enhancing ties between some members and develops the identity of the member. POTW has revealed that in some cases members have a common interest in collecting that extends beyond watches to other items, such as sports cars and fountain pens.

Despite interacting primarily in an online setting, participating in communal activities offline helps to strengthen the network. Face-to-face gatherings (commonly referred to as ‘get-togethers’ or GTGs) occur across the community. As Discussant 22 writes during a discussion on the HoMe forum:

Being a Purist is even better, when you meet other PuristS in the real world – SIHH, Basel¹⁴, GTGs... (Discussant 22).

Face-to-face gatherings include SIHH and Basel, both of which are international horology or watch conventions. GTGs also involve exclusive events organised for WatchZone members by authorised dealers, such as luxury-watch boutiques. Attendance at face-to-face gatherings has extended collectors' networks to include watch manufacturers, watch dealers and brand representatives. This is consistent with research by Belk (1995b), who found that such activities have many social benefits as collectors build social networks through fellow collectors, dealers and other experts (Belk, 1995b).

WatchZone members have shown that they adapt their lifestyles to accommodate their hobby; for example, attending conventions, travelling to shows and changing spending patterns to prioritise collecting, as well as partaking in opinion-leadership activities. Annual international WatchZone gatherings and localised gatherings are an integral part of participation in the community and its collecting activities. Informal localised GTGs include those arranged by small groups of members who live close together or those arranged by a member who is travelling and invites others to meet for dinner.

However, the development of close social ties between members is not apparent across the entire network, as the emergence of friendships differs. Whilst certain

¹⁴ Basel is annual international watch convention where leading watch manufacturers exhibit their new products for the general public to view. For watch manufacturers, Basel offers an opportunity to gain feedback from customers before the product is launched. The customers are often opinion leaders and disseminators of information about the products to others; therefore, Basel also provides a marketing opportunity for exhibitors. Attendees of the watch convention are also able to place offers on watches before they are released into the market.

members look to develop companionships as a result of participation in WatchZone, Tony, the General Manager, does not view members as friends.

Just because I've met these people online, it doesn't mean they are friends, I wouldn't call any of them my close friends... there are lots of dodgy people out there... but there is a lot of members on the site that form really close relationships with other community members (Tony, Skype interview).

Tony's multiple communal roles have a significant influence on the nature of the relationships formed with others. His responsibilities include generating income, organising exclusive events for members, maintaining links with the watch-manufacturing industry and, as Tony states, '*overseeing our whole staff, we have like 30 people now, 30 team, a global team*'. Such responsibilities alter the motivations for participation.

Annual and community-wide GTGs involve the tradition of showcasing watch collections, as collectors bring their collections to show others. A moderator of the community offers an explanation for the motivation to attend a GTG:

A lot of the watches you see at the gatherings are very rare and scarce and are actually really rare, because a lot of the watches that people like to buy on our site are the independent watchmakers'. The ones where they only make like... well, depending on the independent watchmaker some only make, like, 20 watches a year and a lot of our collectors have these watches, so for someone who's never seen one of these watches it's great because now they get to see them as if it's in a store (Andy, FaceTime interview).

The WatchZone gatherings are an opportunity for members to acknowledge the dedication shown towards collecting. This exchange of information regarding collecting and watch collections is a central activity, online as well as offline, with collectors disseminating their knowledge to others across the network. Every GTG

ends with the ritual of a photograph of all the watches brought along by the collectors. There is, of course, a sense of pride and achievement attached to showcasing their collections to fellow collectors. Such behaviour is linked to the multiple motivations of collecting, such as feelings of accomplishment, completeness, and self-expression, and the ‘hunt’ offers a sense of purpose (Formanek, 1991).

The times and dates of the gatherings are circulated privately amongst attendees, as publicly posting details could pose a security concern due to the high financial value of collections. The researcher’s attendance at an annual London gathering at a luxury-watch boutique and dinner developed her identity in the network and her interest in luxury watches (see appendix 10).

8.3 Communal Support and Cooperation

The data analysis reveals that collecting luxury watches is driven by an emotional need, with WatchZone as an outlet to share the passion and devotion. This predominately male network frequently refers to watches in following ways: *‘brain says “think twice”, heart says “when”...’*; *‘speak to them’*; *‘I’ve fallen in love’*; *‘have a love affair’*; and feel a *‘passion for them’*. Collectors perceive the contents of their collections as magical and of sacred quality, as collecting activities result in strong emotional attachment and high levels of involvement. WatchZone allows members to observe the collecting activities of fellow collectors, sharing the joyous moments of adding to their collections. Members participating in the A. Lange and Söhne forum recognised Discussant 23’s achievement by congratulating him. A selection of responses from the discussion thread follows:

Gosh, i nearly fell of my chair! Congrats on this superb acquisition! A very classical sophisticated and elegant masterpiece from the absolute best watch manufacture in the world. Wear it well, for all time!’ (Discussant 24)

Oh my....lucky chap! I am green with envy, and I wish I had beat you to the dealer... Huge congratulations! (Discussant 25)

Very elegant and sophisticated acquisition! Much congrats! I imagine this will make THE ultimate black tie watch (Discussant 26)

Congrats to a well deserve Lange fan! Lovely Cabaret¹⁵! It’s definitely one of Lange’s¹⁶ most underappreciated lines! IMO¹⁷, the Cabaret rectangular case is one of the most beautiful rectangular watches... I really don’t understand why it’s not getting the attention it deserves! You’ve scored a gem! (Discussant 27)

Members are able to recognise the achievements of acquiring a watch, as discussion threads are often initiated that inform others of a member’s latest addition. For collectors, their collections are set apart from the ordinary (Belk *et al.*, 1989), and sharing their collecting tales often draws on expertise, luck and long periods of hunting to acquire rare collectables. In a similar vein, members also show their encouragement and support when collections have been stolen. The below excerpt is taken from a thread in which Discussant 7 announces that a watch from his collection has been stolen:

Nice memories... As the Datograph is not in my collection, onr [sic] in the Lange collection anymore, I thought that these 2 pictures of a watch which made me dream, before making me happy for several years [...] Goodbye, the Datograph, you really made my day! (Discussant 7)

I am sorry that you don’t have yours anymore [...] But i believe you can still manage to replace it if you want to. (Discussant 8)

¹⁵ Cabaret is a watch collection by A. Lange & Söhne, a German watchmaker.

¹⁶ Lange is short for ‘A. Lange & Söhne’.

¹⁷ IMO is an acronym for ‘in my opinion’.

Not that easy. As it was stolen...So, psychologically speaking, it is a real dilemma (Discussant 7)

VERY SAD !!! My thoughts are with you....if my dato¹⁸ would be stolen, I would be devastated (Discussant 9)

Time has passed, now, as it was almost one year ago. But still in my mind, and in my heart... (Discussant 7)

Sweet memoris ... and nicely covered, but it was time to say good bye. From my point of view there are enough pieces in the market and it will be interesting to see how it performs in the future “vintage” market. Time to say “Hello & Welcome” to the new one 😊 Long live the legend! (Discussant 10)

I am still so sorry for the incident.... and I feel for you, my friend. You are lucky to be alive (aren't we all?), life goes on and we have to move on.....with sweet memory in our hearts. You (we) will have new love, in YOUR case, LOTS OF new love, soon, I am sure!! 😊😊 (Discussant 11)

It was so painful, it hurts [...] Thanks for your kind words... (Discussant 7)

Offering their condolences, the members' reactions mirror that of mourning over the death of a loved one. In the above, others are able to empathise with his loss. Whereas non-collectors might ridicule this practice, for members the relationships developed with others in the community are considered as a support mechanism. The discussant's story about the stolen watches from a collection demonstrates that additional layers of symbolic and emotional meanings develop through interactions with their possessions (Richins, 1994; Wong *et al.*, 2012); for example, when taking photographs of their collections to upload to WatchZone. Consistent with research on collecting behaviour, non-collectors do not always understand the passion and interest in the objects in collections (Belk, 1995b; Long and Schiffman, 1997).

¹⁸ Dato is short for datograph, a watch model.

The close connection between the collector and collection are widespread across many communal practices and rituals. Whilst uploading photographs of his latest watch purchase, Discussant 28 personifies three of her watches:

My humble Trio..After all these years waiting...my two babies finally welcomed the arrival of their little brother...hereby my humble trio [...] Wanna express my heartfelt appreciation to Mr and Mrs Dufour¹⁹, and the watch is simply stunning (Discussant 28).

The above example of a watch being humanised is not uncommon, as members often post details of recent additions to their watch collections by beginning the discussion thread with '*new member of the family*', or '*my baby*' or '*family meeting*'. In line with Belk (1995), the collection is regarded as part of the extended self and so any damage or loss to the collection can cause much discomfort and pain to the individual.

The supportive, cooperative and reciprocal behaviours of members strengthen communal ties. The genuine culture of sharing ideas, freedom of speech and exchange of information is prevalent across the community. WatchZone is considered to be one of the most credible sources of horological and watch information. Unlike marketing material published by luxury-watch manufacturers, the independent luxury-watch news articles written by moderators for the community are seen as more credible. These news articles are then published as press releases and are uploaded to the WatchZone forums. George comments on the credibility of WatchZone as an information source during an interview:

¹⁹ Dufour refers to an independent French watchmaker known as Philippe Dufour.

I think one of things that [WatchZone] has provided, and I think even more so when it was a small community at the beginning, is, you know, it provides very high quality, mostly very reliable information (George, Skype interview).

Before press releases are uploaded to WatchZone forums, the management team verify the information to ensure accuracy. The management team prides itself on being impartial and independent whilst maintaining strong links with the luxury-watch industry. During an interview, Harry, a moderator, discussed the community's independence and the role of a moderator:

[W]e don't work for the brand. Yes, of course there are brand reps and manufacturers on here... but the way the site is up means moderators could say anything they want... even if they [watch manufacturers] have done things we don't agree with, or design things we don't like, or gone in a particular direction or using sports people in advertising, that sort of thing, or brand reps, some people don't like that... some do (Harry, FaceTime Interview).

WatchZone moderators are not employed by watch manufacturers, but work closely with them to exchange information. The community often obtains exclusive access to information from the watch manufacturers and employees of watch brands, further demonstrating the close relationships and mutual respect between WatchZone and the luxury-watch industry.

One prominent example of the closeness between individual and business users is the collaboration in product development. The working relationship between Discussant 29, a moderator, and a business user (i.e. a watch manufacturer), enabled the production of a tribute watch²⁰. Discussant 29's contribution as an insider of a

²⁰ A tribute watch is a newly manufactured watch based on the design of an old model.

reputable interest group and as a highly involved consumer meant that she gathered and exchanged information that assisted in the development of a watch. The collaborative effort and knowledge gained was rewarded by Discussant 29 sharing exclusive news of the watch release. The review begins as follows:

Yes that's correct... You read it well, the Deep Sea Alarm is back, and I had the immense privilege to see it in the flesh, and of course give my ideas to the manufacturing team, I've been given the thumbs up to take some pictures, exclusivity for us [WatchZone], and to share them with you before the Embargo is over on the press file! (Discussant 29)

According to the site's view counter, the review was viewed over 10,000 times in the first three days after it was published; according to the moderators, this is one of the most viewed discussion threads of the community. The close working relationship between moderators and watch manufacturers makes the community an ideal platform for members to gain exclusive information. The joint production and involvement in such projects assists with the continuity of the network, as connections between collectors, moderators and watch manufacturers are strengthened.

Cooperative behaviours are also apparent, as members look to the community to verify the authenticity of watches. Trust between business and individual members is essential, as there is a high risk of purchasing counterfeit watches via watch dealers; thus, individuals must not only trust watch dealers to supply authentic watches, but also trust fellow members to correctly verify watches. Developing relationships with watch dealers is an attractive pursuit for serious collectors, as the cost of watches can be considerably lower when purchased through a watch dealer instead of an authorised dealer, such as a watch boutique. Less experienced collectors will turn to

the network when verifying whether the watch is authentic or a ‘frankenwatch’. The term frankenwatch refers to a watch whose mechanical movement is not in its original case, or a watch that might have different parts from the original. Donna’s expertise is often required when distinguishing between original watches and frankenwatches. She distinguishes a frankenwatch from an authentic in the following way:

there are many reassembled watches [...] like take a vintage from 31²¹ for example, and you take a vintage in poor condition okay, the dial is missing, the hands are missing, the movement isn’t working anymore so this can happen, so you consider this watch... if I buy this watch I will have trouble to find another dial, how can I make the movement work because the movement has stopped (Donna, email interview).

This common practice of drawing on the network’s knowledge to verify watches demonstrates the importance of confidence and trust within WatchZone. In line with Social Exchange Theory, informational and social support are important when building trust (Blau, 1964; Whitener *et al.*, 1998). Donna has developed her presence as a moderator and friend to many members; she displays a clear sense of altruism amongst the WatchZone network as knowledge is transferred and shared. This is consistent with a study conducted by Lampel and Bhalla (2007), who found that knowledge-sharing is a result of individuals truly wanting to help others in order to sustain social interaction, showing acts of benevolence.

Reflecting upon the researcher’s own experience as a member, trusting others in the network and the accuracy of information on the forums were crucial. As an amateur watch collector, the researcher initiated the following discussion:

²¹ Harry offers the example of a vintage Rolex manufactured in 1931.

Fellow Purists, I wish to purchase a brand new Steel Grande Ultra Thin Reverso²². Having briefly spoken to watch collectors, some have informed me that a discount off the recommended retail price is available depending on where I purchase this timepiece. However, please could you recommend where I should purchase this Reverso²³ or whether I should stick to buying the Reverso from the boutique? Also what are the pros and cons of buying from the boutique or a dealer, besides for the obvious: price?

Posted on the Jaeger-LeCoultre forum, the researcher specifically asks more experienced and knowledgeable members to provide truthful information about the advantages and disadvantages of purchasing the Reverso from an authorised dealer. Whilst the discussion initiated many responses, the researcher also received numerous private messages. Such activity revealed ‘behind the scenes’ behaviour (as comments made via private message would be frowned upon if posted on the open forums) between amateur collectors and business users as independent watch dealers who offered their services and generous financial discounts. During an interview, Wendy revealed that she was having a custom-made watch made by a fellow member who is also an independent watch maker.

A Purist [a WatchZone member] is busy making a watch for me. After seeing and admiring his work on the AHCI²⁴ and Independent Haute Horologies²⁵ forum and the watch he made for a build, I’ve got to know him through being a moderator, we met, and I have ordered and placed a deposit for a watch... so now a fellow Purist is creating for me! I won’t ruin the surprise, though, by identifying him (Wendy, email interview).

The connections formed in the luxury-watch industry prove to be very useful when collectors are hunting for rare and limited edition watches. Serious and professional

²² Steel Grande Ultra Thin is the name of a Jaeger-LeCoultre watch.

²³ Reverso refers to a range of luxury watches.

²⁴ AHCI is a French watch known as Academie Horlogere des Createurs Independants.

²⁵ Independent Haute Horologies is a forum on WatchZone that is based on independent watchmakers.

collectors are more strategic about the relationships they develop and maintain. These networks are concerned with interacting and creating relationships with business and individual members who are experts and knowledgeable; thus, have the potential to assist with acquiring watches.

8.4 Sources of Tension and Conflict

Emerging from the data analysis are the tensions, rivalries and diversity that are inherent aspects of the community. Two key sources of tension and conflict arise: firstly, the competitiveness arising from pursuing collecting activities, and secondly, tensions with members who do not conform to communal norms.

The analysis has revealed that there are many references to a predator-prey relationship between the collector and the object being collected. For example, as members seek to obtain rare objects to add their collections, such activities encourage competitive and tension-creating behaviours. During an online discussion, members talk about what is regarded as the most enjoyable aspect of collecting; a common response is the 'hunt'. In the following online thread, Discussant 8 offers the following explanation of the hunt when asked about favourite aspects of collecting luxury watches. His comment is consistent with many other serious collectors:

[V]ery simple...Mainly its the hunt. Like our esteemed Omega moderator always signs off 'happy hunting'. Thats the very best bit for buying vintage watches. The second bit is the excitement at getting the watch through the post, the one you've hunted for. Its all wears off after that and i get bored with them...I would say that the 'hunt' is identifying the watch you are after, searching for it through various sources, in my case the internet. Finding one that isnt quite right and discarding it then finding the right one, negotiating or

bidding for the right price and then buying it knowing i've obtained a piece that fits into my collection (Discussant 8)

The vast majority of members are male, further emphasising the predatory metaphor. In this setting, the collector is the predator, the process of searching is hunting, and the object is prey. Serious and professional collectors show predatory characteristics, as they not only are attracted to forming relationships with actors who possess power and authority, such as moderators, but also use the community as part of the 'hunting' process. Formanek (1991) has found that hunting for objects is often an aggressive process, as the predator carefully plots the attack and captures the prey in the presence of real or imagined competitor. For the predator, the captured prey becomes a trophy, a symbol of one's prowess.

Assisting each other to source watches, offering advice, sharing expertise and organising face-to-face meetings reduces the tension caused when collecting. However, paradoxically there are also tension-creating behaviours in the virtual community, such as the competition that emerges as members hunt for rare or highly valuable watches. At times, there can be a strain on the relationships between actors as the competitiveness hinders information-sharing. Rather than sharing information, members simply present their newly acquired vintage timepiece without revealing the details of the hunt.

[S]ome think we are in competition with one another...lets see who can have rarest watch, the fanciest complications, the biggest collections... and then they get secretive about where the watch is from as if we can't find out, this collecting brings out strange things in people (Discussant 14).

For Pearce (1994), collectors shows signs of being fiercely competitive when hunting for objects and show traits of greed, possessiveness and irrational behaviour. The dysfunctional consequences of collecting show obsessive, addictive and compulsive behaviours when searching for objects (Chatwin, 1989; Long and Schiffman, 1994). Observations of the online interactions show that Discussant 9 is one of the many members who intertwine conflict and cooperation when participating:

I enjoy your posts and you seem like a grand guy but I must ask you [Discussant 30] if you cannot think of better things to do with your money? Perhaps there are good deeds that can be done? (Discussant 9)

This particular post caused much controversy within the network. The moderator of the forum quickly advised Discussant 9 and others to be careful with this approach. Although this post was aimed at one individual in the network, because of the extravagance of the watches discussed in the forums the comment may also have personally offended others. The responses to the posts considered a range of viewpoints on the topic. Some shared the view of questioning whether good deeds were carried out alongside this form of pastime. Others considered the original post as highly inappropriate and encouraged the general management of the community to enforce community rules.

The same member, Discussant 9, not only goes against the norms of the community and causes a subtle form of conflict when asking whether money might be better spent on good deeds, but also exhibits cooperative communal behaviours. In the following thread, the same member is seen to be protecting the community from ‘crooks’:

BEWARE A CROOK AMONG US!... There are many unethical people roaming the internet seeking to separate us from our hard earned money. I urge member to use every method available to research and verify the facts of their potential transaction. Obviously one of the safest ways to avoid any trouble is to support your local authorized dealer and purchase a watch directly. (Discussant 9)

The conflict caused by Discussant 9 strengthened the relationships amongst members who agreed with his point of view. In line with Håkansson and Snehota (1995), conflict is considered to keep relationships healthy and allow for growth. The dissolution of some relationships can be beneficial and desirable (Alajoutsijarvi *et al.*, 2000). As moderators enforce the community code of conduct by disabling the functionality for any further comments to be made, they use their power to communicate their expectations to the wider community. This suggests that although members have the freedom to discuss any topic they wish, the management of the community has the ultimate power and authority to block discussion threads.

In the above example, the findings are in line with IMP research as it is evident that tension and conflict can in fact enhance relationships amongst members in a network. However IMP research takes a rather superficial approach to understanding the causes and impact of tension. The analysis has revealed that tension is a complex and deep-rooted issue amongst members of WatchZone. One form of tension is the subtle sense of jealousy of those members who demonstrate extremely high levels of wealth and own vast quantities of luxury watches. While the ‘elite member’ status is a prestigious title given to very few members, issues concerning jealousy and envy are particularly evident when discussing how individuals are given elite member status. The following response is given when a member is asked how he was given elite member status:

I was a moderator from the first days. It was probably the generosity and kindness of the people who run [WatchZone] that gave me “elite”. [The WatchZone CEO] and all have ALWAYS been consistently tolerant to my attempts to bring entertainment to an overly serious hobby! (Discussant 30)

Discussant 30 assisted in setting up WatchZone, and has strong links with the luxury-watch manufacturing industry. However, this elite member status creates distance between members who do not possess the same level of wealth and vast collections. During an interview with Zac, he shared his opinion of the CEO and members with elite status, whilst reiterating the pleasure he received from the hunt for watches. His opinion of the CEO follows:

He is basically a filthy rich doctor of psychology. I don't like him, because he is the sort of person that will walk into a dealer's and look at a watch and buy it [...] what I like about watch-collecting is the hunt, the achievement for craving for something or wanting something, the build up to it and the hunt for it. Like for vintage watches, certainly the hunt for it [...] you have to have a sense of achievement (Zac, Skype interview).

The above response is an extreme example of jealous and tension towards members who possess superior watch collections and display outward signs of wealth. More subtle examples of envy and tension exist across the community. The social hierarchy formed as a result of roles such as moderators and gatekeepers are associated with communal power, the selection for such positions cause envy amongst members. The position of power and influence of the moderators in particular is discussed during an interview with the WatchZone General Manager:

[I]t's great because I get to see the industry from both viewpoints – as a collector's viewpoint and also as an insider... as moderators we get to know a lot of secrets about the industry (Tony, Skype interview).

According to the WatchZone site, moderators are usually chosen based on their knowledge, expertise and the types of watches they collect. The selection process of becoming a moderator for WatchZone offers insight into how certain members in the community are given authority and power. A key informant of the study, John, was asked how he became part of the WatchZone management team. His response is as follows:

[B]ecause, um, well, the site founder [...] he recognised and he saw my posts and he said 'hey, maybe this guy... he seems like he's a good guy, and he seems like he knows his stuff and he seems really friendly and he seems like he has a good vibe on the web' (John, in-person interview).

John offers limited explanation of how he became a moderator, and simply puts it down to his 'good vibe' in the community. However, later on in the discussion, John reveals that the moderator is selected on the basis of their watch collections. Two interviewees also offered their responses on how they were chosen for the role as a moderator:

They offered me to a moderator, they offered me the privilege to a moderator because I feel I have a collection, and I was exchanging a lot with other people so they asked me to a moderator, it was quite simple. (Harry, FaceTime interview).

I think this is the way WatchZone usually does it, I think, they promote from inside so you just get more involved in the community. You post a lot, the executives notice you and then sort of approach you. (Andy, FaceTime interview).

As the process of becoming a moderator is not a transparent process, as shown by the limited information disclosed about the procedure for appointing moderators, it causes much upset and tension amongst members aspiring to become moderators. The role of a moderator is considered an attractive position because it involves

governance of the community, has financial benefits, increases a member's status and gives members access to insider knowledge. Gary, a popular member, expressed this interest in the moderator role. When asked about how to become a moderator during an interview, he offered the below observation:

Don't ever ask anyone. If you ask 'how do you become a moderator?', you'll never become a moderator. You have to be invited. A lot of people have suggested on more than one occasion each that I should be a moderator. But apparently, because I haven't got the money to buy new watches or the interest [...] But if you look at the moderators, and who they are, they all fit into a fairly tightly defined bracket. Now, it's probably a bit unfair to say, the majority, or more than 50% are of Asian origin, quite a lot more than 50%. The owner is of Asian origin, then all them are wealthy in their own right, or have jobs that pay a very high salary (Gary, Skype interview).

Well known to the community, John offers the perspective that a member's profession and luxury-watch collection are strongly linked to whether or not they are chosen to become a moderator. It is clear that members who possess power and authority outside of the community often have a role of authority in WatchZone. The dynamics of the network are influenced by internal forces, such as a member's interaction with others in WatchZone, their collecting behaviours and collections, as well as external forces, such as their standing and position in society. Although the moderator selection process causes tension, members' strong sense of affiliation with the overall community and passion for luxury watches assists with the continuity of the network as members continue to participate.

Tension can also arise as watch manufacturers and brands relaunch products that were once considered as vintage watches. The relaunch of 1931 Reverso watch (referred to as the Tribute) by Jaeger LeCoultre caused controversy, dividing collectors and consumers views. For certain groups of members the Tribute was

viewed as an ‘authentic replica’, a dialogue between two participants on a WatchZone forum exemplifies the excitement:

‘...This TT [Tribute] is amazing... I like this more than the vintage Reverso, hard to believe it...isn’t it? Its just perfect...’ (Discussant 4)

‘To tell you a secret...I find the modern Reverso more wearable than most of the vintage...But, that is just between you and me, my friend...’ (Discussant 6)

As Jaeger LeCoultre present an updated and modified version of the vintage Reverso, the launch of the Tribute reflects staged authenticity (MacConnell, 1973) targeted towards a more mainstream audience, which, according to Goffman (1963) as an inevitable consequence of the commodification process. These members are lured by the ‘genuine’ Reverso brand story and its narratives featuring advertising that pays homage to Polo and the 1930’s juxtaposed against the mainstreaming and modernisation of the product. However the network does not share this view as members challenge the watch manufacturers motives, as perceived authenticity is determined by satisfaction and product quality, and the Tribute is viewed as something inherently inauthentic. An experienced and well-respected collector summarises this category’s views in his statement that:

‘... I think JLC has, unfortunately, lost its way a bit with the new sizes and some of the new styles. I cannot and do not expect to like everything in the JLC--or any other brand's--product range, but there seems to be a fundamental change in the new products...’ (Discussant 3)

As collectors associate Jaeger LeCoultre with heritage and nostalgia, these ideals contradict the watch manufacturer’s latest product offerings. The emphasis placed on nostalgia and tradition creates negative feelings towards the Tribute, in line with the

notion of that ‘things were better then than now’. During an interview with Pedro, he challenges the fundamental authenticity of the Tribute and other Jaeger LeCoultre watches, and possesses a clear view of what Jaeger LeCoultre ought to be producing:

‘... Is JLC [Jaeger LeCoultre] still striving to make classic watches, or only watches that appeal and sell in the here-and-now?... Sure, I bet JLC sells a lot of the new 40mm models, and that's, of course, very important (they're in the business to sell watches, after all!) but they won't be selling these to me. To be perfectly honest, I feel a bit left out....’ (Pedro, FaceTime interview)

This quest for the ‘original’ is reflected by those who strictly seek the authentic, vintage Reverso. Such consumers demonstrate through their forum contributions that they are only interested in and attracted to the indexically authentic and original Reverso (of course there can only be one truly original – the first off the production line - but assuming the typically limited production runs several examples of the original should exist). On a deeper level, professional collectors such as Donna are not able to look beyond the superficial elements of the Tribute; despite its overall appeal Donna sees problems and issues, distinguishing the real from imitations:

‘it leaves me a little cold. I don't want a new vintage watch, I want a real vintage watch [...] The fact that it doesn't interest me is probably a better reflection on the lovely original than this new offering...’ (Donna, email. Interview)

The authenticity of product offerings are a source of dispute as watch manufacturers may be sincere in their motive and believe they are producing authentic watches. However reactions to the Tribute watch highlights the dynamics of the network, where authority in the community is given to individuals and in particular elite collectors. Experienced collectors and other high-involved consumers may reject product offerings such as the Tribute watches, and accuse manufacturers of being

mass-marketed orientated, engaged in commercial exploitation and disputes the product's quality.

The approach to analysis taken from the IMP Network Approach provides an initial overview for understanding complex network consisting of multiple brands, manufacturers, watch enthusiasts and collectors. The usefulness of the IMP research is limited to exploring broad issues, and providing insights into holistic issues such as cooperation and conflict within the network. Building upon the broad analysis of interactions taken from IMP research, a more in depth and micro level analysis reveals that community-specific rituals and practices shape the network. Thus, the focus on understanding consumer rituals, practices and communal traditions contributes to knowledge on the network of heterogeneous WatchZone members. It also reveals that through pursuing collecting activities and engaging in communal practices a social hierarchy that emerges amongst the collectors and non-collectors of WatchZone.

8.5 Summary

The final analysis chapter has revealed that the communal rituals, traditions and practices, the supportive and cooperative behaviours, and the tension and conflict all influence the dynamics of the network and how it is developed and sustained.

The communal rituals, traditions and practices are firmly centred upon the primary motivation for participation, which is to acquire information to benefit a member's collection. Engagement in online communal activities (i.e. sharing stories related to hunting and contributing to WristScan), attendance at exclusive member gatherings

organised by watch brands and manufacturers, and attendance at informal meetings all assist with the development of heterogeneous networks (comprising of collectors, manufacturers, dealers and brands).

WatchZone consists of supportive and cooperative behaviours, as members share their collecting achievements and disseminate their knowledge across the network. Interestingly, pursuing collecting activities leads to paradoxical behaviours, as members experience great joy and excitement whilst also feeling tension and jealousy. Members who do not conform to communal norms are publicly challenged, despite the obvious conflict caused; members come together to enforce the WatchZone code of conduct. The emergence of a predatory metaphor (the members as the predator, the prey as the object, and searching for watches as hunting) creates tension as members engage in competitive behaviours to showcase their mastery by obtaining scarce and highly valued watches. Collections and collecting behaviour often result in formal power when members are given communal roles as moderators, which add to the tension and conflict.

Chapter IX

Discussion

9.1 Introduction

This chapter begins by examining the heterogeneous nature of the luxury-watch collector community, WatchZone by focusing on the characteristics and the influence on the network of members and their behaviours.

As the analysis reveals that the vast majority of the community consists of collectors, the chapter discusses the motives and behaviours of collectors that have emerged. This section adds to knowledge on collectors and collecting as the findings show a paradoxical nature of collecting. The WatchZone community serves to illustrate that collecting is rational and irrational, deliberate and uncontrollable, and cooperative and competitive.

The concluding section examines how the diverse nature of community member activities influences communal positions and roles. A social hierarchy that emerges within WatchZone demonstrates the interplay between pursuing collecting activities, positions of (formal and informal) power and status.

9.2 The Heterogeneous Luxury-Watch Community

Existing theories about diversity, complexity and heterogeneity in communities are contradictory, with prior research asserting that fragmentation has a pervasive outcome (Thompson and Coskuner-Balli, 2007; Irwin, 1973). By drawing from outside of consumer research, IMP Group research has shaped initial thinking on complex networks consisting of diverse members. Traditional, IMP research is

predominately studied in the context of industrial (i.e. business-to-business) networks, and considers the influence of surrounding environmental characteristics on the network (Wilson and Möller, 1995). Others have explored specific events and interactions in networks (Gadde and Håkansson, 2001), investigated cooperation-conflict along with power and status in networks (Håkansson *et al.*, 2009), and motivations underpinning behaviours (Johanson and Mattsson, 1992).

Despite the descriptive power of IMP research, the usefulness of this body of work when studying the nuances and diversity in consumption-orientated communities is limited. Although this study has been driven by understanding from a holistic perspective by exploring:

- Specific events within relationships, such as specific exchange episodes and processes.
- Investigating cooperation–conflict and power–dependence imbalances, and strong and fragile relationships.
- Motivations and drivers underpinning interactions, behaviours and responses.

The heterogeneity of WatchZone is apparent across the workings of the community. This platform attracts collectors, *normal* consumers, independent and authorised watch dealers, luxury high-end watch brands, and independent luxury-watch manufacturers. This latter group seek to gain an understanding of consumer behaviour within this consumer category; thus, reinforcing the study’s claim of the value of understanding such communities from a broader perspective.

Unlike communities of subcultures, which have been studied with a specific focus on consumer participation and the interplay between consumers, WatchZone is comprised of collector-to-collector and business user-to-collector interactions that are synergised as well as oppositional. Studies into communities of subcultures have made significant contributions to knowledge by exploring the strong interpersonal bonds, rituals, and beliefs constructed through a shared interest in a consumption activity (Arnould and Price, 1993; Kozinets, 1999; de Valck *et al.*, 2007), but they have paid attention only to the individuals and consumers of the community. WatchZone, which is a gathering of individual and business users, offers an ideal platform to study the behaviours and interplay between various types of community members. A specialist interest in collecting and producing high-end luxury watches has uncovered a complex network of consumers, manufacturers, brands, authorised and independent dealers and other experts.

The diversity of WatchZone is also reflected in its hybrid structure, as it is a subculture and brand community. Many WatchZone members are unified by their interest in luxury watches and their passion for specific luxury brands. Unlike subculture communities, a brand community is characterised by a set of social relationships that centre around the use of a focal brand (Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001). Despite the theoretical usefulness of brand-community research, WatchZone is not centred upon a singular brand. Rather, it consists of multiple forums specifically dedicated to high-end luxury brands, including Omega, Patek Philippe and Jaeger-LeCoultre. Each of the 30 forums has a designated moderating team and a following of members consisting of consumers and producers. These micro brand communities each possess their own rituals, activities and gatherings, creating micro networks of

members who share a passion for a particular luxury-watch brand. Although such micro networks are distinct, many members view themselves as ‘Purists’, forums are governed by the same code of conduct, and members engage in informational, social and financial interactions.

The multiple networks that exist within WatchZone resemble the characteristics of consumer tribes, as members identify with each other based on shared experiences and emotions facilitated through a variety of brands and products (Cova and Cova, 2002). Unlike brand and subculture communities, tribal communities are not confined to a single consumption collective, and members possess a fluid identity. Similarities can be drawn with WatchZone members, as users can take on multiple identities and roles, and contribute to numerous forums, participating in various brand-specific and general horology-based gatherings.

Pioneering work into consumer tribes by Cova (2001) introduced the idea that over time the bond (social connection between members) is considered more important than whatever is being consumed as in tribes membership is fragmented and transient (Cova and Cova, 1997). Given that the analysis has revealed distinct collector categories and multiple member identities, this central assumption of consumer-tribe research does not uniformly fit with WatchZone.

As members view WatchZone as a forum to obtain credible information that is independent from luxury-watch manufacturers and watch brands, serious and professional members often view the social interaction as a secondary objective. Rather, serious and professional collectors showcase their collections and share details of the hunt, highlighting their mastery and expertise in collecting. In contrast,

members who are enthusiasts and amateur collectors place equal importance on the watches and the linking value gained through participation. In this regard, less experienced members have been found to gravitate towards forming social networks consisting of experts such as watch dealers and experienced collectors. Thus, the degree of interest and involvement in collecting luxury watches has an impact on the whether the linking value is more important than the object that first brought the members together.

The analysis of the working relationships between the WatchZone management team and luxury-watch producers, manufacturers and brands shares similarities with entrepreneurial tribes. Such tribes produce and customise products (Goulding and Saren, 2007), highlighting that consumers are no longer mere receivers of an organisation's offerings, but rather they are active participants, co-creators, collaborators and, at times, hijackers (Cova and Dallı, 2009). In the same vein, moderators work closely with watch manufacturers and brands to produce luxury watches (i.e. the Jaeger-LeCoultre Deep Sea Alarm watch) and the exclusive WatchZone watch (i.e. the All-Black Rescue Watch) developed by the St Gallen Horology Company. These co-producing activities lead to the creation of synergised networks consisting of consumer experts (i.e. serious and professional collectors) and producers (i.e. manufacturers and brands). The interactions between these groups of members are vital to the continuity of the community, as WatchZone is provided with a source of exclusive information, embraces growth and strengthens relations between individual users and the luxury-watch manufacturing industry.

Many academics have found that virtual communities provide access to a broad range of information (Whittaker *et al.*, 1997; Etzioni and Etzioni, 1999; Gupta and Kim, 2004), and that consumer participation leads to word-of-mouth communication (Kozinets, 1999; Brown *et al.*, 2007). In particular, representatives of watch manufacturers and luxury-watch brands encourage WatchZone members to swap their stories and mingle by releasing exclusive information to the community and holding member-only events at their boutiques and factories. Moreover, the WatchZone management team, consisting of expert consumers, has become a key link and source of consumer insight when creating new products. The study reveals that cooperative and collaborative network dynamics are apparent amongst consumers and organisations.

However, WatchZone is platform that creates a re-balancing and imbalance of power between organisations and consumers. WatchZone members, in particular collectors contributing to online discussions, criticise, challenge and condemn watch manufacturers. These impassioned and expert consumers possess opposing values from organisations with regard to the authenticity of products, product quality, methods of production and the sincerity of the organisations' motives. Occasionally, members have been found to contest the behaviour of luxury-watch brands, causing significant tension during the release of new products. Encapsulating such acts of conflict and conflicting views is the release of the Tribute Reverso by Jaeger-LeCoultre. Debates on authenticity are key in consumption subcultures (Belk and Costa, 1998; Leigh *et al.*, 2006), as academics have studied behaviours of authenticity in communities and attitudes towards brands (Fine, 2003; Beverland, 2006). The WatchZone network represents a multiplicity of voices, where similar

and conflicting ideals driving the continuity of the community through strengthening connections between members and their interest in the focal consumption activity (collecting luxury watches), and creating micro networks relating to specific collecting activities.

As a result of the diversity in members, their ideologies and beliefs, along with the variety of communal activities and practices, this virtual community of luxury-watch collectors combines elements of a subculture and brand community, whilst possessing aspects of a consumer tribe. In this regard, WatchZone consists of the following distinct attributes:

- 1) A venue to showcase collections in order to demonstrate mastery and expertise amongst collecting peers and to an appreciative audience.
- 2) Interactions based on the ideology that objects in the collection possess a magical or sacred status.
- 3) Acts as a support group as members deal with the dysfunctional consequences of collecting behaviour.
- 4) A platform for business opportunities for independent watch dealers.
- 5) Provides consumer insight and opportunities to develop working relationships between expert consumers and watch manufacturers and brands.
- 6) Its own shopping environment (known as the Collector's Market) to buy and trade watches.

By studying collecting behaviour in a community setting, the research reveals that collector communities with WatchZone as an illustration has reconciled work on consumption communities Furthermore the study shows even though heterogeneity

can cause tension and fragmentation, the benefits achieved through interactions and engaging in communal activities motives heterogeneous members to cooperate and collaborate.

9.3 The Paradoxical Motives and Behaviours of Collectors

The findings reveal that the majority of WatchZone member pursue collecting activities. This study adds further insights into the world of collectors by exploring their behaviours in a communal setting, interactions with fellow collectors and producers. The interplay between collectors, producers and activities are driven by a set of paradoxical motives and behaviours as members of WatchZone, collectors in particular cooperate and compete with others in the community.

Existing research into collecting is rich and insightful as studies have focused on understanding collectors' motivations for collecting (Formanek, 1991; McIntosh and Schmeichel, 2004), the level of interest in the consumption activity (Wright and Ray, 1969), and the types of objects collected (Bryant, 1989). This study broadens prior research on collecting behaviour, in particular the collecting activities associated with prestigious and luxury products, and its wider impact on collecting communities such as WatchZone.

The analysis has revealed that the majority of WatchZone members engage in a form of collecting behaviour as they pursue acquisitive and materialistic quests for high-end luxury watches. When distinguishing collecting behaviour from other consumption activities, academics associate collecting behaviour with (1) its concern

for a set of objects, (2) the passion invested in obtaining and maintaining these objects (Danet and Katriel, 1989; Greenberg *et al.*, 1990; Long and Schiffman, 1997), and (3) removing objects in a collection from their utilitarian or mundane status so that they become special and sacred (Belk *et al.*, 1988).

As acquisition is key to collecting, WatchZone is seen as an integral aspect of luxury-watch collecting for its members. Participation allows for the fulfilment of informational goals by blogging and sharing images of the latest additions to watch collections, discussing current affairs within the world of horology, and reviewing newly released watches and vintage collectable timepieces manufactured by some of the industry's most prestigious watch brands.

The findings reveal that collecting activities consist of many paradoxical motives and behaviours (see table 9.1). There are contradictory reasons why individuals collect, and why they display opposing behaviours. As a result, the collecting behaviours and motives impact the dynamics of the WatchZone network, the communal activities, and interactions with others.

Table 9.1 Paradoxical Collecting Motives and Behaviours.

Motives		WatchZone Members' Comments
Impulsive	vs.	‘I become completely crazy, but I am well aware, that my watch passion does not stand the test of logical reasoning’ (Discussant 19)
Deliberate		‘I look on the forums market and regularly see if I can buy my next grail’ (Discussant 14)
Irrational	vs.	‘I am clearly a fairly logical person in many aspects of life, but when it comes to watches, I am not’ (Discussant 21)
Rational		‘Lots of research into technical aspects but it still comes... down to aesthetics and \$\$\$\$’ (Discussant 3).
Nurturing	vs.	‘Welcome to the newest member of the family’ (Discussant 8)
Aggressive		‘The “chase” involved a great deal of learning and fun’ (Discussant 25)
Behaviours		WatchZone Members' Comments
Collecting perfect objects	vs.	‘It’s the whole package that has to be desirable and of genuine quality’ (Discussant 18)
Collecting imperfect objects		‘In my point of view, is that the Tribute [watch] kept all the imperfections of the original pieces’ (Discussant 11)
Organising and caring for the collection	vs.	‘My watch is rattling softly in its box’ (Discussant 20)
Searching and hunting activities		‘I think a lot of the pleasure in this hobby is the thrill of the hunt for many’ (Discussant 30)
Cooperation	vs.	‘I enjoy the interaction with everyone, and I want to share my feelings, thoughts, and opinions’ (Discussant 9)
Competition		‘Some think we are in competition with one another to have see who can have the biggest and best collections’ (Discussant 5)

Collectors display impulsive and irrational behaviours, with reports of the fear of losing control, and dysfunctional consequences, such as the possibility of addiction. WatchZone provides a safe haven for these members to pursue and discuss their collecting activities. WatchZone members' motives for the hunt, which is often referred to as a '*perpetual search for luxury*', are simultaneously irrational and rational (Chatwin, 1989). The rational behaviours are particularly evident as members engage in information-seeking activities. These are contrasted against irrational behaviours, as members report of feelings of 'losing control' and 'sudden urges to buy'. Aristides (1988) claims that collecting is not necessarily an obsessive act, although over time obsessive and compulsive tendencies may emerge. Significant variations in behaviour, from the harmless gathering of luxury watches to a dark side, where an individual experiences a fear of losing control and possibility of addiction, create a diverse network of collectors.

Academics have long debated whether collecting is a uniformly good or bad form of consumption (Goldberg and Lewis, 1978; Eisenberg, 1987; Belk *et al.*, 1989). For many, WatchZone serves as an important reference group, allowing members to interact with others without embarrassment or signs of guilt. In this regard, the network acts as a support mechanism and provides a nurturing environment. This is important as Belk (1995a) asserts that collecting is a solitary activity and an individualistic quest.

An individual's membership of the community as well as their collection enhances their self-esteem. WatchZone membership offers a sense of belonging, where affiliative possessions create shared meanings and symbols (Banister and Hogg,

2004). Pursuing collecting activities is purposeful (Goldberg and Lewis, 1978): collections represent mastery and knowledge-generating (Stewart, 1984) and the objects are part of the extended self (Belk, 1988; Dittmar, 1992; Karanika and Hogg, 2010), reflecting the collector's identity (Wong *et al.*, 2012).

However, as a form of materialism, collecting behaviour can manifest itself as envy and possessiveness. Collecting is conceptualised as a form of devotion to material needs and desires, as consumers are focused on acquiring and spending money (Durvasula and Lysonski, 2010) and an attachment to worldly possessions (Richins and Dawson, 1992); therefore, feelings of envy emerge towards those who demonstrate material wealth through their collecting activities.

Over time, collectors often find it difficult to remain satisfied with their collections; thus, this tension-reducing pastime that once offered pleasure and satisfaction can develop into a tension-creating activity that impacts on an individual's behaviours in the community. As a result, signs of non-generosity and non-cooperative behaviour emerge, with Richins (1987) reporting that a consumer's satisfaction with purchased objects reduces more quickly as materialism increases, along with competitiveness. Examples of this are when WatchZone members simply upload a photograph of their 'find', demonstrating their unwillingness to disclose crucial information to others. These examples are not uncommon.

Participation in WatchZone provides information concerning product releases, horology-related news and exposure to members' collections, fuelling the quest to obtain better or newer objects. Aspirations linked to ambitious goals and high standards in collecting behaviour can have a negative impact on the collector's

emotional well-being. This type of exposure manifests itself through dysfunctional consequences for the members, such as feelings of envy, where members act irrationally and feel a need to compete. Authentic members of the community and true collectors are considered as those who partake in communal activities, participate in traditions and rituals, and purchased the exclusive watch, despite its high price and difficulty to acquire. At the centre of these networks, the members who own the most prestigious collections are admired for their devotion, expertise and material wealth, and become a source of jealousy.

9.4 The Complexities of Collecting Behaviour in a Communal Setting

The implications of pursuing collecting activities are wide spread across the community. While existing collecting behaviour studies have found collectors to be in search of psychological security, and look to fulfil insecurities and unresolved fantasies experienced during childhood (Goldberg and Lewis, 1978), for certain members participating in WatchZone influences their collecting and communal behaviours.

Extant research has tended to focus on the function of collecting for collectors. For instance scholars have emphasised a collection serving a need for security (Formanek, 1991), preservation, history and a sense of continuity (Belk, 1988). In the case of WatchZone, pursuing collecting activities as wider ramifications within the community. The findings demonstrate that members' collections serve as a marker of social status. That is, the collections that consist of the most prestigious watches are a signal to others in the community of their relative rank in a social hierarchy. As a consequence, members strive to own luxurious watches not merely

out of a functional need for time-keeping and love of collecting itself, but due to a desire to signal status within the community. Existing research has found that low levels of power and status lead consumers to desire and acquire status in order to compensate for their lack of power (Dubois *et al.*, 2010). In WatchZone, enthusiasts and amateur collectors seek to raise their status and profile not only through communal participation, but also through ‘hunting’ and acquiring watches that are rare, contain complex mechanical complications or are made by the most prestigious watch manufacturers.

The desire to gain status is considered as a central motivation in human behaviour (Berger *et al.*, 1980). According to Dubois and Laurent (1996) and Han *et al.* (2010), individuals often participate in status-signalling activities with the intention of gaining social and individual benefits. Whilst collecting serves multiple motivations (Muensterberger, 1994), individuals pursuing collecting activities are in search of psychological security as a result of deep feelings of insecurity and unresolved fantasies experienced during childhood (Goldberg and Lewis, 1978). By collecting luxury watches, WatchZone members are motivated by self-expression, sociability and the search for personal continuity as a result of the search (or hunt) for objects. For example, WatchZone members participate in communal activities online, such as WristScan, and offline, such as face-to-face gatherings, to showcase their watch collections to others in the network. This type of behaviour is consistent with the findings of Greenberg *et al.* (1990) that collectors are proud of their collections and often enjoy displaying them for others. Social and financial benefits, preferential treatment, and the recognition of community members are considered as outcomes of participation. Similar findings are reported by Smith and Apter (1977); this self-

indulgent consumption experience is considered to be worth any sacrifice, requiring the skill to acquire and ‘rescue’ objects, whilst acquiring knowledge reserved for the elite few.

The social world in this study is WatchZone. Here, there is a distinct relationship between a member’s luxury-watch collection and the power and status they possess in the community (see illustration 9.1). The individual achievements through collecting are viewed as a form of status-enhancing consumption, as members demonstrate the desire to flaunt their successes to fellow collectors. Collecting is, therefore, characterised by the need to enhance or improve the self (Baker & Gentry, 1996). For WatchZone members, collecting is performed as a valuable service for the community. For instance, when showcasing collections online and at member gatherings, professional collectors expect that others will stand in awe. In this regard, the status hierarchy in WatchZone legitimises collecting and, in some instances, justifies extreme collecting behaviours.

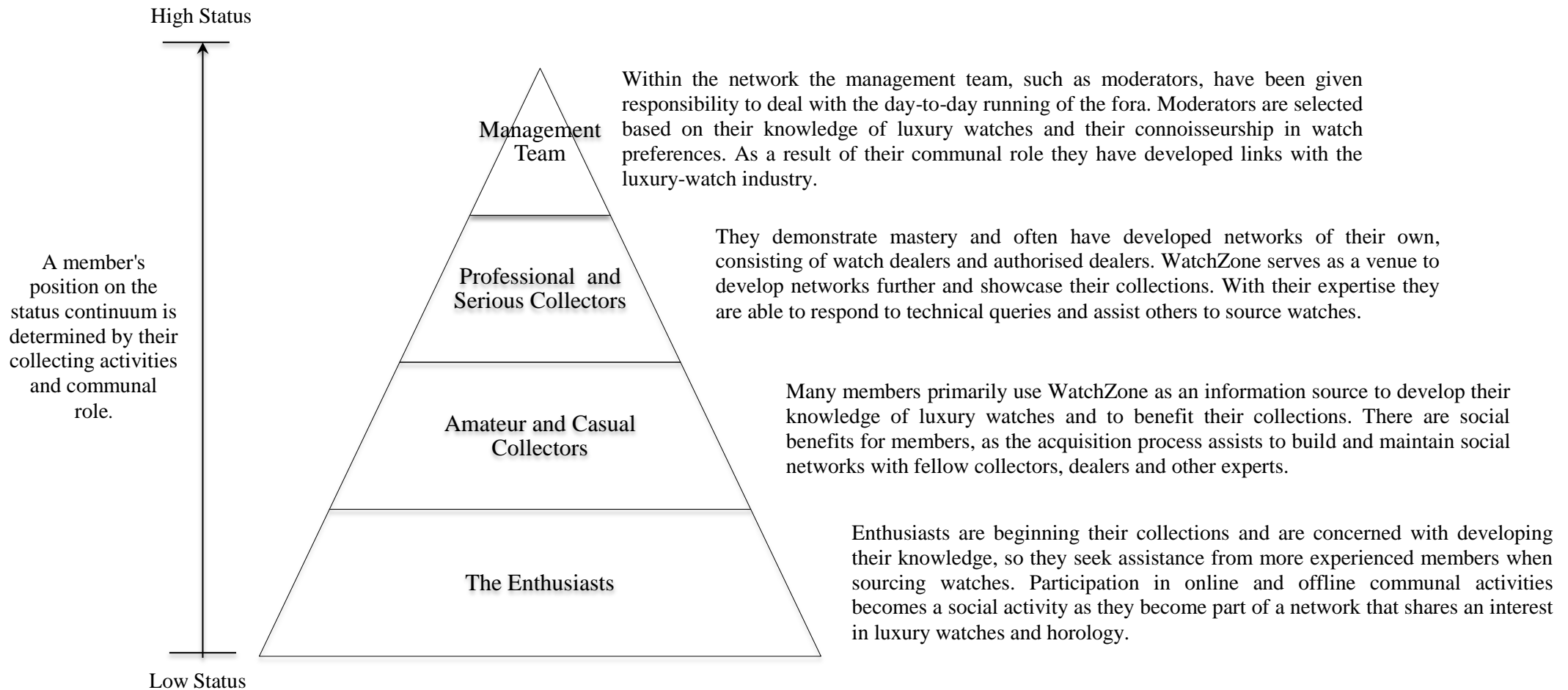


Illustration 9.1 Conceptualisation of Status Hierarchy amongst WatchZone members.

Individuals are motivated by the desire to provide prominent evidence of their ability to afford luxury items; therefore, the underlying driver is to impress others of their ability to pay high prices (Piron, 2000). Veblen (1994) asserts that certain goods are acquired and consumed by individuals to signal their wealth, place and standing in society in order to convey a particular image to others around them (Bagwell and Bernheim, 1996). In the case of WatchZone, a member's luxury-watch collection is a marker to others in the network of that member's wealth and mastery, as collections consisting of prestigious and complex watches demonstrate a certain level of expertise. The tendency to purchase and showcase expensive products is referred to as 'conspicuous consumption' (Veblen, 1994). These behaviours are in line with Belk *et al.*'s (1988) view that collectors show a different mind-set towards collected objects, leading to feelings of power and mastery and taking part in a '*consumption experience that engenders and reflects deep and profound meanings in people's lives*' (p. 281).

Despite the correlation between collections consisting of the most prestigious watch brands and the status of the owners within the community, there is also a correlation between size of a member's collection and their status. In line with existing theory, the larger the size of the collection (in this case, the luxury-watch collection), the greater the owner's status (Baudrillard, 2005). The size of a collection is a gauge to others in the network not only of a member's accumulated material wealth but also their skill in hunting and acquiring objects.

Therefore, members who possess large collections consisting of the most prestigious and mechanically complex watches have a high rank in the network. Members who

own expensive collections convey status or good taste; within WatchZone, owning the most expensive watches is an important signaller and heightens the status of a member in the network. Etta *et al.* (2008) found similar results when researching conspicuous consumption and its influence on social interaction. The results show that conspicuous consumption is also the ostentation of something symbolic to specific reference groups in order to gain their recognition. In case of WatchZone, the luxury-watch collection represents wealth and expertise.

When considering the role of the luxury-watch collection on a member's position in a network, it serves an important function in assisting to attract power. Power is regarded as one's relative control over valued resources (Dubois *et al.*, 2012), whilst status relates to the respect one has in the eyes of others (Magee and Galinsky, 2008). The more expensive and prestigious a watch collection, the more it is considered as an indicator of devotion to collecting activities, because the owner has invested financially and in terms of time to establish the collection.

The idea of a luxury-watch collection as a marker of status and power is clearly reflected in the network's selection process for moderators. The findings have revealed that the management team select moderators based on their expertise and collections. Through participation in communal activities, members showcase their collections and their knowledge, increasing their online presence and their identity in the network. The management team of WatchZone recognise those members who show the highest levels of mastery, and select them for the role of moderator. From the perspective of members, moderators have a greater level of standing and status in the network. Moderators are then given 'insider status', further enhancing their status

and power in the network: they are given the authority to ban members and create links with representatives of the luxury-watch industry. These connections have benefits for the network as a whole, as members are provided with exclusive information about products and developments in the industry.

There are also personal benefits for the management team and moderators, as they are invited to take part in projects with watch manufacturers and to attend exclusive events. Thus, members of the network equate larger and grander collections with greater status. Furthermore, participating in communal activities is seen by members as an opportunity to socialise with those at the top of the hierarchy and to progress their own status.

However WatchZone members also challenge the sincerity of the collecting motives, and chastise members who show outward signs of ‘showing off’ and those who break communal norms. Authentic collectors are those who ‘chase’ and ‘hunt’ for objects to add to collections, and almost ‘suffered’ for their collections, unlike those who collect objects without investing vast amounts of time in the hunt. Debates concerning ‘being versus doing’ are prevalent across consumer research as Kozinets (2002a) found that Burning Man festival attendees who are only stayed for part of the celebration were insincere. Similarly, Leigh *et al.* (2006) discovered that when studying a MG owners community, those who did not repair their cars nor drive them to community events were not seen as genuine members. Relating to the issue of sincerity, WatchZone members believe there is a fine line between members who demonstrate their expertise through sharing details of the hunt, possess a genuine passion for collecting and attend community gatherings, and those members who are

less involved in community practices and ideals. Thus individuals gain status and are perceived as authentic members through sincere collecting motives and their contribution and participation in community activities.

9.5 Summary

The major interpretations from the data analysis have revealed that the WatchZone network is complex and varied and consists of heterogeneous members. These members hold a shared passion for luxury watches, but differ in their motivations for participation in WatchZone, their degree of interaction and their level of interest in pursuing collecting activities.

The second major interpretation from the data is that there are paradoxical motives and behaviours associated with collecting. Members act irrationally and rationally, and activities are tension-reducing and tension-creating, leading to cooperative and competitive behaviours amongst members.

There is a correlation between an individual's status in WatchZone and the size and prestige of their collection. Therefore, the overall network and micro networks are structured around a status hierarchy, where members with the largest and most luxurious collections are perceived to be the most powerful in the network.

Chapter X

Conclusions

10.1 Introduction

This final chapter begins with a discussion of the theoretical contributions that this study has made to the academic literature on consumption communities, collecting behaviour and the consumption of luxury goods.

The chapter then provides details of the study's implications for marketing practitioners and brand managers. It concludes with a discussion on the limitations of the study and offers avenues for future research.

10.2 Theoretical Contributions

Through the use of IMP Group research, this study expands knowledge on consumption communities. While research by the IMP Group has primarily focused on industrial markets where rather than focusing solely on one aspect of an interaction, all members/ parties of the interaction are explored. The usefulness of research by the IMP Group is evident by the holistic approach to studying interactions and networks occurring in WatchZone. The use of IMP research in a predominately consumer setting is a secondary contribution; a key contribution is the approach taken to exploring this complex community and its various factors such as its members (i.e brands and collectors) and the environment, its characteristics and communal practices and rituals, all of which influence the WatchZone network. However, the usefulness of IMP research is somewhat limited when conducting an in depth analysis into status, power positions and the role of possessions in this

communal context. This study builds upon the notion of environmental characteristics influencing networks and their development, by focusing on a micro level analysis of member roles and positions, and involvement and participation.

Thus, these findings contribute to the existing understanding and knowledge of consumption communities. Across numerous contexts, consumer-behaviour researchers have identified how subculture consumption, brand communities and consumer tribes facilitate informational dialogue, where interactions between members (most notably, consumers) range from superficial to deeply meaningful and are based on an emotional and intangible tie to an ideology (i.e Cova and Cova, 2001; Kozinets 2001; Kozinets and Handelman, 2004), a product (i.e Brown *et al.*, 2003), an activity (i.e Arnould and Price, 1993; Beverland *et al.*, 2010) or brand (i.e Muniz and Schau, 2005; Cova and Pace, 2006). This work moves beyond focusing on one type of consumption community; rather, it reconciles research into subculture communities, brand communities and consumer tribes. A key contribution of this study is that it explores the nature of a heterogeneous community (which combines elements of a subculture community and brand community and possesses the ideology of a consumer tribe), the heterogeneity of communal members, and their rituals and practices.

The findings demonstrate this network of brands, manufacturers and individuals such as high-end luxury watch enthusiasts and collectors is influenced by the characteristics of the community, thus shaping its development and how the network is maintained. The characteristics of the collector community are: (1) shared emotional connections, (2) the sense of belonging created through group symbols,

and (3) communal norms, rituals and traditions. Although existing studies recognise these characteristics of virtual communities (Kozinets, 1997; Hagel and Armstrong, 1999; Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2002), this study extends theory by considering the impact of the interactions on networks of members pursuing collecting activities. While these characteristics play a crucial role in the WatchZone community, similar findings could be extended to other collector communities such as stamp or car collector communities.

A key contribution of this study is the exploration into conflict and tension within consumption communities. Despite calls to address conflict and tension within consumption communities (Campbell *et al.*, 2009; Devalck, 2007), limited attention had been paid to understanding such inherent aspects of communities. Furthermore, extant research possesses contradictory views regarding conflict and competitiveness within communities, causing fragmentation and tension within a network and has the potential to hinder continuity (Thompson and Coskuner-Balli, 2007; Irwin, 1973). This study uncovers unified communal activities and the gathering of a homogeneous market segment as well as diverse member segments with differing motivations and paradoxical collecting activities. Thus, this study reveals previously underexposed aspects of communities. The research site, WatchZone proves to be a rich community that encourages members to collaborate and however collecting activities and luxury goods consumption causes conflict and tension.

Scholars have studied collectors across a range of objects such as art (Chen, 2009), stamps (Bryant, 1989) and cars (Leigh *et al.*, 2006), however prior collecting research has failed to differentiate collectors based on their levels of engagement and

involvement. By contributing and expanding upon existing knowledge of collectors, this study acknowledges the complexities of collectors and their collecting activities by presenting a categorisation of collectors. Findings from this study reveal that varying levels of engagement in collecting activities significantly influence network development. Given the popularity of consumption community research, Kozinets (1999) identifies distinct member categories that each vary in their motivations for joining the community and the nature of interactions. Building upon work by Kozinets (1999), the collector categorisation distinguishes collectors by their involvement in collecting activities and the formation of connections with others such as fellow collectors, dealers and manufacturers. These collector categories will be useful for future explorations of collecting behaviour such as car and stamp collectors.

The findings of this study also offer detailed insights into collecting practices in a hybrid (online and offline) communal setting; an area of collecting research that had previously been neglected. Despite existing collecting-behaviour research recognising the online environment as an information source for collectors (Carey, 2008; Apostolou, 2011), little is written on virtual communities as a venue for establishing a collection and as a platform for searching for and locating objects to add to collections. This study has revealed how a collector community facilitates interaction between collectors, independent and authorised watch dealers and watch manufacturers and brands, and has illuminated collectors' motivations for participating. This individual and solitary consumption activity (Belk, 1995a) is transformed into a communal pursuit that combines informational and social interactions. The shared emotional connection and enthusiasm for horology and

luxury watches creates a network and micro networks of fellow collectors and other experts.

Existing research has revealed rational and deliberate motives associated with pursuing collecting activities (Storr, 1983; Belk, 1995b). On the surface, researchers present collecting behaviour as a predominately cooperative activity where individuals share knowledge and assist one another at collecting clubs and fairs (Bryant, 1989; Beh and Pickton, 2003). However a closer examination of collecting behaviour amongst WatchZone members shows many contradictory activities and motives, revealing a significant contribution of this research is the notion of collecting behaviour as a set of paradoxical activities and motives.

By studying the interplay between the members, collectors who make up the majority of the member population demonstrated impulsive and deliberate, and irrational and rational motives when pursuing their collecting activities. Such motives led to cooperative and competitive behaviours, resulting in the emergence of a predatory metaphor where the predator (the collector) hunts (seeking information and other associated activities) to gather the prey (objects for the collection). This study extends knowledge on collecting behaviour through the use of this predatory metaphor to understand the fundamental impact on network dynamics and structure. Feelings of kinship and the spirit of the community materialise as members participate in communal activities, strengthening the connections. However, communal practices and activities also create clashes and tensions in the network, as members question the sincerity of the collecting motives of collectors and manufacturers and as feelings of envy emerge in relation to collections. This study

extends knowledge by illustrating that the tensions experienced as a result of engaging in collecting activities and participation in a virtual collector community shape the network, and its development. The paradoxical behaviours of members are an inherent part of the WatchZone network and collecting behaviour.

Existing research has found that collectors are secretive as they sharing very few details of their collections and collecting activities with both collectors and non-collectors (Chen, 2009) with extreme cases of collecting paralleling hoarding behaviours (McIntosh and Schmeichel, 2004). Whilst prior collecting behaviour studies focuses on the negative consequences and mysteriousness of collectors, this study uncovers that within WatchZone, pursuing collecting activities becomes a form of conspicuous consumption. By viewing collecting behaviour as a conspicuous consumption activity, this work builds on research by Baudrillard (2005) and Etta *et al.* (2008) that demonstrates that the ability to acquire and consume certain goods is a signal of wealth. WatchZone culture encourages such behaviours, as members demonstrate high levels of commitment and perseverance in order to increase their communal rank. In this regard, there is a clear connection between one's luxury-watch collection (i.e. its size, the rarity of watches in it and the number of watches made by prestigious manufactures) and one's status within the network. Consistent with Belk (1988), consumers' material possessions (i.e. luxury-watch collection) constitute part of their 'extended self', and this research highlights the role of collections in communities in enhancing self-esteem and increasing rank. Within this network, collections are a signal of mastery; thus, less experienced collectors (e.g. enthusiasts and amateur collectors) tend to gravitate towards experts (e.g. professional and serious collectors) as an information source.

Collectors as community members associate luxury watches as symbols of social class, status and prestige. Members engage in communal activities, such as sharing details of the hunt for objects, uploading photographs of their finds, and attending face-to-face member gatherings to present their collections to others. These activities have become an integral part of communal culture and essentially involve the showcasing of their luxury-watch collections. For members, status within the tribe is achieved through showcasing their vast luxury-watch collections. Members who are admired by others show the ability to acquire scarce or high-end luxury watches, possess strong links with watch dealers and manufacturers, and receive special services (e.g. invitations to preview watches, guided tours of watch-manufacturer factories and meetings with senior employees of luxury-watch brands). This form of consumption shapes the network and creates an environment based on 'keeping up with the Joneses' behaviours.

10.3 Practical Implications

The findings of this study have many practical implications. The findings have shown that WatchZone is essentially a rich knowledge network providing individuals and business users with a platform to participate in communal activities centred upon horology and high-end luxury watches. As a large proportion of the community consists of highly involved consumers who spend vast sums of money on luxury watches, by participating in consumption communities such as WatchZone marketers can creatively cultivate brand loyalty in numerous ways.

Marketing practitioners could capitalise on this by developing and nurturing relationships with collectors on a more personal level. This study's findings have

shown that traditional marketing communications and celebrity endorsement are ineffective ways of encouraging collectors to purchase products. Understating the commercial motives of product releases and creating rich brand stories will enhance perceptions of the brand and its product offerings. Organising exclusive events; for example, by inviting members to the factories where the watches are manufactured, would create a more personal relationship between the brand and the collector, and their watches. This could encourage further purchases; as well create positive discussion about the product and the brand amongst members of WatchZone forums, enhancing the brand image. This strategy assists to develop connections and affiliations between the consumer and brand/manufacture.

Special interest groups and communities such as WatchZone offer organisations and their marketing practitioners vast amounts of information about consumer opinions (Hagel and Armstrong, 1997; Brown *et al.*, 2007). The data within these communities offers rich and detailed insights into the buying behaviour of consumers and provides feedback on products. By developing an online relationship with collectors, marketing practitioners will understand which members are considered to be opinion leaders, who possesses the power and authority in the network and the types of activities that occur. Marketing practitioners could have input in the communal activities and competitions, such as WristScan, and use the images from this activity as part of the watch brand's marketing campaign. Initiating communal practices and encouraging interaction will assist with the growth of the community and inspire co-creation between consumers and watch manufacturers.

As a brand community, WatchZone gives its members the opportunity to build and sustain networks of highly involved consumers, modify products and establish their own brand meanings and communal rituals. Schau *et al.* (2009) recognise that successful brand communities continuously evolve and encourage members to collaborate and engage with the brand and co-create, becoming brand partners (Vargo and Lusch, 2004). Our findings suggest that the development of collaborative working relationships between individuals participating in the community and watch manufacturers is beneficial to everyone involved. Marketing practitioners should document any modifications and suggestions made by consumers, with Saren *et al.*, (2013) recognising that highly involved consumer groups can be an intrinsic part of new product development. Thomke and von Hippel (2002) recognise that information regarding customer needs as well as information concerning how to satisfy those needs is integral to new product development. Communities such as WatchZone provide fertile ground for marketing practitioners to obtain crucial information relating to product development.

Through producing rare and collectable goods, and employing marketing campaigns that create hype and excitement around these products, marketing practitioners can capitalise on this consumption activity. By producing a small number of goods that are priced relatively higher and promoting the product in communities such as WatchZone, there is a strong possibility that it will create a 'buying frenzy'. DeGraba (1995) considers the use of scarcity, where there is limited production of goods set at higher prices, as an effective marketing strategy, with Stock and Balachander (2004) referring to this strategy as a '*signalling of quality*'. This practice can raise the level

of tension in collecting and in the community as organisations promote the idea of hunting and encourage members to engage in the ‘chase’ for products.

10.4 Limitations

As with all research projects, this study possesses a number of limitations. WatchZone is an interesting and niche community, catering for a set of highly involved members; thus, the findings of this study may not apply more widely to collecting behaviour. As with many ethnographic studies, the focus on a specialist community may not be representative of all virtual communities; however, Starbuck (1993) states that insightful theorising might not always emerge from large and generalisable data sets, but from explorations into atypical organisations. Such limitations are associated with the study’s philosophical stance and methodology in general, due to the bias and prejudice linked with interpretivist research.

A second limitation is the relatively small number of interviews, as other researchers of collectors have noted (i.e. Mouline, 1967 and Chen, 2009). Interviewers are rarely allowed to see a collector’s entire collection and interviewees are notoriously secretive about their collecting activities (Mouline, 1967); Chen (2009) found similar results when studying art collectors. Anxieties concerning privacy were overcome through the utilisation of pseudonyms throughout the study to protect the identity of the community and its members. Furthermore, the 18-month ethnography allowed the researcher to develop her identity within the community and gain the trust of members by revealing her dual role as a researcher and luxury-watch enthusiast.

A further limitation is that despite the communal presence of business members, the majority of the data collected is centred upon understanding the role of individuals, such as collectors, in the community. However, collectors, and in particular male collectors, make up the majority of the members. In order to offer a more thorough understanding of the diversity of WatchZone membership, more interviews would have been required with independent and authorised watch dealers, manufacturers and watch brands. The difficulties in terms of gaining access to data meant that the researcher used additional data-collection techniques, such as observations during attendance of exclusive WatchZone member events where individual and business users were present. To ensure an accurate representation of the community and its members, the researcher conducted a member-check process by asking key informants to verify her observations and interpretations of the data.

The final major limitation of the study is related to the complexity of the community and its structure. WatchZone comprises of many brand-specific forums, each with its own set of contributors and moderating team; therefore, understanding the entire community, with its high number of members and high volume of interactions, was a difficult task. As with any other research study, there are restrictions in time and resources (Leek *et al.*, 2003); therefore, over a 18-month data-collection period the researcher immersed herself in communal practices online as well as offline, monitored the activities of the main (HoMe) forum, and utilised the knowledge and expertise of key informants (one of whom is a gatekeeper and the other a professional collector) to fully understand the community. Interviews were conducted to gain a specific understanding of motivations for collecting and participating, and the history and management structure of the community.

10.5 Avenues for Further Research

The primary focus of this research has been to gain a deep and more insightful understanding of how networks develop in a community of luxury-watch collectors. Network development could also be examined in other types of collector communities, such as stamp or car collectors, or in predominately female collector communities. The dynamics of the network and how a member's communal position and role influence their collecting interests might differ significantly, as Belk *et al.* (1988) and Sherrell *et al.* (1991) have found that collectors vary significantly in terms of their interest and passion for the object and their collecting activities.

There is potential to compare network development between collectors of authentic luxury watches and those who collect counterfeit luxury watches. As there has been a significant growth in the consumption of counterfeit goods, there have been calls to explore this consumption phenomenon (Staake *et al.*, 2009). Furthermore, this would fill a gap in knowledge on the use of communities for counterfeit goods (Key *et al.*, 2013).

As this study explores the consumption of high-end products, further research could examine the consumption of luxury goods across different markets. The data uncovered that WatchZone has an international presence and members are geographically dispersed. Future research could compare luxury consumption of WatchZone members from different geographical locations; for example, the differences and similarities between consumers and collectors from emerging and developed markets. This topical research would provide an in-depth understanding of

the phenomenal demand for luxury products and services amongst consumers in emerging markets.

Considerable efforts have been made to understand the causes of materialism (Richins and Dawson, 1992; Richins, 1994) and conspicuous consumption (Bagwell and Bernheim, 1996; Segal and Podoshen, 2013) with studies recognising that family dynamics (Rindfleisch *et al.*, 1997) and the media (Shrum *et al.*, 2005) add to the development of a consumer's materialist behaviour. Future research could investigate materialist behaviour; for example, exploring what fuels high-end luxury goods consumption, particularly in emerging markets, the vibrant culture of visible 'flashy' spending, and carrying out a detailed investigation into socio-psychological consumer desires. The WatchZone forums that consist of high numbers of contributors from emerging markets, such as the off-topic and sports car forums, would be an ideal research setting.

The exploration of WatchZone, a multifaceted and diverse community, could be extended through future research that investigates interactions between business users. Specifically, carrying out a more detailed analysis of business users and their participation and involvement in the community will broaden understanding of business-to-business interactions. The findings from this study demonstrate that WatchZone offers a platform for various businesses users to exchange technical information and share brand- and product-related information. To address calls to explore research on business-to-business brand communities (Bruhn *et al.*, 2014) and more specifically the importance of such networks in maintaining buyer-seller relationships (Andersen, 2005), future work could investigate the role of brand

communities in creating long-lasting relationships. Research could also explore the different mechanisms required to establish mutual trust and value creation in business-to-business communal interactions.

10.6 Summary

The findings of the study make a primary contribution to knowledge of consumption communities by providing a holistic and in-depth investigation of network development in a heterogeneous community of collectors of luxury goods. Drawing on industrial marketing and purchasing thinking, this study explores the heterogeneity of communal members, their rituals and practices and their implications on the network by paying specific attention to communal characteristics, members' involvement, members' roles and participation, and communal rituals and practices. The study also extends knowledge on collecting behaviour, highlighting how the community facilitates the collector's paradoxical motives and behaviours. For marketing practitioners and brand managers the study has provided insights into venues for market research, the benefits of developing working relationships with consumers, and the use of 'hype-creating' promotional strategies.

A key limitation is that the findings are derived from a specialist community and may not be representative of all communities. However, this limitation is associated with the chosen methodology in general, and can be addressed by future explorations into different types of communities.

This exploratory study has revealed that there are many avenues of future research in the areas of network development, consumption communities and consumer

behaviour, and more specifically material and conspicuous consumption, and consumers from emerging markets.

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Appendix 1. ACR Paper

Athwal, N. (2014) Power and Status in Consumer Communities: Some Insights From A Netnographic Study Of Luxury Timepiece Collectors. *Advances in Consumer Research*, forthcoming

Online community participation has been studied in a variety of marketing contexts, most often focussed either on an object (Belk and Tumbat, 2005), on a specific brand (McAlexander and Schouten, 1998; Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001), or activity of mutual interest (Cova and Cova, 2001; Kozinets, 2002). However there is limited, if any research on an online community that focuses on a shared interest in the object(s), the activities, ideology and the brands *simultaneously*. We argue that such communities exhibit greater commonalities with the market place (where multiple choices, brands, activities, messages, and influences are the norm) than studies that focus on only one of the three perspectives.

Our selected community is, if not the major, international, hybrid (online and offline), luxury timepiece discussion forum, but which we will refer to it by the pseudonym, WatchZone (WZ). This platform has attracts collectors, *normal* consumers, independent and authorised watch dealers, global high-end watch brands, and independent luxury watch manufacturers. The latter group seek to gain an understanding of consumer behaviour within this category thus reinforcing our claim of the value of understanding such communities in a broader marketing context. However, the focus of our work relates to the collectors, who make up the majority of the member population based on their activities, interactions and reactions.

Despite the global financial crisis, affluent consumers and in particular collectors of luxury goods are spending vast sums of money by indulging their appetite for the finer things in life. This consumption behaviour is apparent in WZ, as participation is centred upon collecting watches produced by high-end brands; thus, incorporating a mutual interest in an object (luxury-timepieces), a shared passion for horology, an activity (collecting behaviour) and brands (such as Audemars Piguet, Jaeger-LeCoultre and Patek Philippe).

Collecting behaviour is a specialised form of consumption that is primarily concerned with gathering more of something (Belk, 1995a). Although often regarded as an individual pursuit (Long and Schiffman, 1997), the act of collecting may be carried out within groups, e.g. families (Pearce, 1994), dyads or couples (Hughes and Hogg, 2006) or communities (Beh and Pickton, 2003). Our research focuses on the last of these, groups, for whilst some collectors are reclusive and private, most derive pleasure from sharing their passion within like-minded individuals, both offline (Formanek, 1991; Chen, 2009) and online (Leigh *et al.*, 2006).

Since the focus of our study relates to cultural and behavioural aspects of an online community, a netnographic approach was adopted and immersive, participative and observational techniques employed over an 18-month period. This approach offers a rich and more complete understanding of the phenomenon of interest (Kozinets, 1998; Giesler and Pohlmann, 2003). Data collection methods included extensive sampling of an online discussion forum, creation and development of relevant discussion threads, online interviews, and informal face-to-face discussions with members, face-to-face interviews with key informants, active participation, and the recording of field notes.

An iterative approach to data collection and analysis provided the authors with a deep understanding of and confidence in the research environment (Broderick *et al.*, 2003). Throughout the data analysis process, the authors sought to identify instances where collecting-orientated activities and behaviours were related to a) materialism and conspicuous consumption; b) status and rank; and c) power relationships. In order to achieve maximum trustworthiness, and representativeness (Lincoln and Guba, 1985), the analysis was presented to key informants for member check feedback.

The main findings from this part of our study, is the willingness within WZ for openness in sharing of information, and the positive way in which newbies (both in terms of community membership and experience in luxury-timepieces collecting) are accepted and integrated into the community. Yet interestingly, findings reveal the

very limited extent to which within-group information, or even WZ membership is discussed with non-members.

Despite community focus on the high-end goods, the community has its rich and its poor, its insiders and its outsiders, its status symbols and its aspirants. Members' collecting activities and luxury-watch collection influences their power and status in the community. There is a perception amongst WZ that members with large collections have a higher status. Collection size and the rarity of objects collected signal not only one's expertise in collecting, but also material wealth. This supports findings in the wider literature on consumer behaviour in which there is a tendency of individuals to judge themselves and others in terms of the quantity and quality of possessions (Veer and Shankar, 2011; Dubois *et al.*, 2012). Elite collectors receive special services and perks such as exclusive invitations to luxury-timepiece manufacturer events, all of which aid collecting activities. One's identity as an elite collector generates feelings of uniqueness and signals mastery, enhancing one's power and influence in WZ.

The ideas explored within this paper offer many strands for additional research. The consumerism aspect of influences on actual purchases in collector communities, the role and value of the 'hunt' for objects of interest, the impact of specific influencers and influences on the actual choices and purchases, and the exploration of the collector types within the community (e.g. the novice, passionate, inquisitive, or serious-hobbyist) (McIntosh and Schmeichel, 2004) all pose interesting questions. Future researchers in this field may wish to examine whether the behaviours such as cooperation vs. competition, nurturing vs. aggressive, irrational vs. rational and affective vs. cognitive conflict with the values and norms of a collector community.

Appendix 2. Abstract for Journal of Marketing Management paper

Athwal, N. and Harris, L. (Revise and resubmit) Inauthentic Relaunch or Authentic Replica? The Case of the Reverso. Journal of Marketing Management (revise and resubmit)

Abstract Through the use of a critical case study of the relaunched product (Reverso 1931 Tribute watch) by the Swiss luxury watch manufacturer, Jaeger LeCoultre to investigate perceptions of authenticity in the context of a restored, non-mass market (niche), luxury product. Employing multiple netnographic research methods, this paper makes three key contributions to consumer research on authenticity, (1) nostalgic product storytelling while communicating novel and updated features of a relaunched high-end luxury product creates consumer perceptions of iconic, indexical and symbolic authenticity; (2) varying consumer perceptions emerge as the relaunched product is viewed as a new offering, a restoration, a revamp, or a replica; (3) for highly-involved consumers (i.e professional collectors) the original is a reference point, thus the relaunched product becomes inherently inauthentic. We suggest that marketing practitioners could use such insights to better segment markets when launching a restored product.

Keywords brand, authenticity; inauthenticity; luxury goods; typology; netnography

Appendix 3. Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Grand-tour question: Could you tell me about your reasons for participating on WatchZone?

1 - Collecting Behaviour

This set of questions is specifically related to the participant's interest in luxury watches and collections.

When did you become interested in luxury watches?

- *Linked to understanding their interest in collecting.*

What is it about the timepieces that you like?

- *Understanding what motivates participants to collect.*

Tell me about your timepiece collection.

- *Testing to see whether they will share details of their luxury-watch collection.*
- *Wanting the participant to share stories of how items were acquired.*

Which timepiece is next on your list to purchase? Why this timepiece?

When will your watch collection be complete?

- *Literature on collecting behaviour suggests that for some collectors, collections are never complete. Establishing the participant's view on collecting and whether collecting will ever end.*

Explain the process of the 'hunt'.

Tell me about your last luxury-watch purchase you made.

How do you go about researching the timepiece before you purchased it?

- *These questions led on to interaction in the virtual community. Establishing how participants research and search for objects to add to their collections.*

2 – Interaction

This set of questions relates specifically to the interactions that occur on the virtual watch-collector community, WatchZone.

How did you come across WatchZone?

- *Establishing how they found this community.*

What was your motivation for joining and participating on WatchZone?

- *Perhaps the motivation to join was linked to hunting for a watch. Also trying to establish what makes this virtual watch-collector community different from others.*

How has your interaction in the community developed since you joined the community?

- *Establishing whether the participant's interaction has developed could also be linked to the development of relationships with other members.*

How do you see your role within the community?

- *Trying to understand the participant's perceived role within the virtual collector community.*

How does WatchZone contribute to your collecting behaviour?

- *The role of the community in their collecting behaviour. This could potentially vary based on whether they are a serious or amateur hobbyist.*

Which forums do you tend to contribute to the most? What sources do you use?

- *Understanding the participant's usage behaviour.*

Do you regularly blog/post comments?

- *Understanding how frequently they participate.*

How long did you browse the site for? Hours?

How has the community helped you make a purchase decision?

- *The role of WatchZone in their decision-making*

3 – Relationships

This set of questions focuses on the relationships that the participant has developed with other members of WatchZone.

What types of activities do you tend to get involved in within the community?

- *Linked to understanding their participation in communal activities.*

Has this led to the development of relationships with other members?

- *Whether the participation in communal activities leads to relationship development and maintenance.*

What kind of relationship do you have with moderators and the management of the virtual community?

- *Establishing what type of relationships they have with members who have power within the community.*

What type of members do you tend to form relationships with?

- *Understanding which types of members the participants forms relationships with.*

Do you share similar tastes in watches with them?

How do you sustain relationships with other members?

- *Understanding what processes in the virtual community help to maintain relationships amongst members.*

Have you personally experienced or observed competitive behaviours amongst members when hunting for watches?

- *Establishing whether issues concerning conflict/competition exist in the community.*

4 – Networks

The final set of questions relates to the networks that exist within the community.

Do you interact with members outside of the virtual community?

- *Establishing whether the participant has developed mixed-mode relationships with other members.*

Do you come to many of the get-togethers?

- *If the member has attended get-togethers, the researcher will probe deeper –what is the purpose of the meetings, how relationships have developed, and what activities take place at the meetings etc.*

How has the virtual community assisted you to develop a network around your collecting behaviour and interest in luxury watches?

- *Establishing whether the participant has a network of members who are hunting for the same objects – is the network potentially outside of the UK – potentially showing signs of cooperation.*

Have other members helped you source watches to add to your collection? If so, how have they helped?

- *Has WatchZone brought together members, watch manufacturers and dealers – again potentially showing signs of cooperation when collecting?*

Appendix 4. Levels of Analysis

In order to deal with the complexity of networks, the analysis process began with analysing the content of interactions in the WatchZone network. The five levels of analysis were taken from IMP research, specifically drawn from the Interaction and ARA models. Analysing the collected data in this way provided a systematic tool for understanding how relationships and networks develop in WatchZone, whilst highlighting emergent themes (Pettigrew, 1985).

First Level – Virtual Community Characteristics

The first level of analysis involved identifying the characteristics of the virtual community. The environment will have a key impact on the types of interactions that occur and how networks develop; therefore, identifying and understanding the key characteristics of WatchZone is crucial.

Second Level – Activities

The second level of analysis is the activities within WatchZone. By focusing on the activities, the researcher paid attention to the links and bonds created between members as a result of the activities. The central questions during this level of analysis were as follows.

- What activities occur between the members of WatchZone?
- What types of links and bonds are created between members?

Third Level – Resources

The third level of analysis involved the resources. In the online environment, WatchZone, the members are tied together through a shared interest in watch collection. This level of analysis incorporated elements of the Interaction and ARA models, as the resource ties and the exchange episodes are analysed. The central questions asked during this stage of the analysis were as follows.

- What is being exchanged? Using the Interaction Model, this can involve informational, social, financial, or product/service episodes.
- What effect does the exchange have on a member's behaviour? This can involve behaviour in the community and watch-related behaviours.

Fourth Level – Members

The fourth level of analysis involved the members. The other members, and the bonds established with others, became a central part of a member's identity and affect the way they interact with others. The following questions were asked during this level of analysis:

- What types of members are in the network (e.g non-collectors, collectors, watch manufacturers, luxury brands)?
- How do the varying levels of interest in watch-collecting affect their participation in WatchZone?
- How do the sentiments, attitudes, and norms of the member's involved affect how a relationship evolves?
- How is trust developed through interactions between actors?
- What are the motivations for actors to participate in WatchZone?
- Do the interactions on WatchZone meet the expectations of members, and if so, how?

Fifth Level – Networks of Members

The fifth layer of analysis involved the overall network and micro-networks within WatchZone. In order to understand the networks, the researcher focused on exploring how communal participation such as engaging in communal activities and collecting behaviour impacted a member's role and position. During this level of analysis the following questions were asked:

- Pattern of activities – what activities take place when? What impact do these activities have on the overall motivation for WatchZone participation and interest in watches/ collecting behaviour?
- Webs of members – how are social structures formed? What webs of members exist (do macro and micro level - tribes exist, if so how are they formed)?
- Position in a network – The member's network position will be defined by the characteristics of the network.
- What roles do members have in WatchZone? How connected is the member to other members (linked to their levels of participation in the community, interest in luxury watches and collecting)?

Appendix 5. List of Interview Participants

The table shows a list of the interview participants for the study.

Pseudonym	Gender	Collector Category	Location	Occupation	Interview Type	Other Information
James	Male	Amateur collector	UK	Investment Banker	Skype	
Hans	Male	Enthusiast	Netherlands	Self-employed	Email	
Larry	Male	Amateur collector	USA	Financial Advisor	Skype	Collects Omega and Diver watches, fountain pens and cars, and key informant for the research
Ken	Male	Professional collector	Singapore	Self-employed	Skype	Primarily uses the Collectors Market
Michael	Male	Professional collector	UK	Insurance Broker	Face-to-face	Key informant
Andy	Male	Professional collector	Australia	Doctor	FaceTime	Collects Omega watches and Moderator of HoMe
Lloyd	Male	Casual collector	France	Luxury brand employee	Skype	Primarily contributes to brand-specific forums
Monty	Male	Amateur collector	India	IT Consultant	Skype	
Paul	Male	Casual collector	Spain	Property Developer	Skype	
Pedro	Male	Professional collector	Brazil	Builder	FaceTime	
Mo	Male	Serious collector	Italy	Tattoo Artist	Skype	
George	Male	Serious collector	UK	Investment Banker	Skype	
Wendy	Female	Casual collector	USA	Professor	Email	
Phillip	Male	Casual collector	Germany	Self-employed	Skype	
Gary	Male	Serious collector	New Zealand	Retired Police Man	Skype	
Mike	Male	Professional collector	UK	Self-employed	FaceTime	Independent watch dealer
Matthew	Male	Casual collector	UK	Doctor	FaceTime	
Eric	Male	Amateur collector	Australia	Government Worker	Email	
Tony	Male	Professional collector	USA	Property Developer	Skype	General Manager and Gatekeeper
Harry	Male	Serious collector	China	Financial Advisor	FaceTime	Moderator
Donna	Female	Professional collector	USA	Teacher	Email	
Zac	Male	Serious collector	UK	Self-employed	Skype	
John	Male	Serious collector	UK	Insurance Broker	Face-to-face	Key informant

Appendix 6. List of Online Forum Discussants

The table shows a list of online forum discussants from WatchZone.

Discussant	Gender	Collector Category	Location	Other Details
1	Male	Casual collector	USA	
2	Male	Casual collector	France	
3	Male	Serious collector	Hong Kong	
4	Male	Serious collector	USA	General Manager
5	Male	Casual collector	China	
6	Male	Serious collector	Indonesia	
7	Male	Casual Collector	France	Moderator
8	Male	Amatuer collector	Indonesia	
9	Male	Amatuer collector	France	
10	Male	Casual collector	Australia	
11	Male	Professional collector	U.K	Independent Watch Manufacturer
12	Male	Serious collector	China	
13	Male	Serious collector	USA	
14	Male	Casual collector	Malaysia	
15	Male	Watch Enthuiast	Australia	
16	Male	Watch Enthuiast	U.K	Beginning collecting activities
17	Male	Amatuer collector	Singapore	
18	Male	Professional collector	USA	Moderator
19	Male	Serious collector	USA	Gatekeeper
20	Male	Serious collector	China	
21	Male	Professional collector	Australia	Watch Dealer
22	Male	Casual collector	Indonesia	
23	Male	Amatuer collector	Singapore	
24	Female	Serious collector	Brazil	
25	Male	Watch Enthuisast	USA	
26	Male	Serious collector	U.K	

27	Male	Professional collector	USA	Watch Dealer
28	Female	Serious collector	China	
29	Male	Serious collector	Australia	Moderator
30	Male	Professional Collector	Malaysia	Elite Status Member

Appendix 7. WatchZone Code of Conduct

A WatchZone moderator's role is viewed as to enforce the virtual community's rules and code of conduct. Please the code of conduct has been slightly altered to protect the identity of the virtual community.

Some simple guidelines for participants of this forum:

- Please note that all official or self-promoting announcements, press releases or posts must be submitted to a moderator. Any posts or announcements which are not so submitted, but posted directly to the discussion forums, may be deleted without notice.
- Range of topics: Please keep the topic somewhat related to the brand or stated topic of the specific forum. Discussions about company heritage, tradition, philosophy, and policies are also apropos.
- Have fun. There are no dumb questions, just questions that haven't found an answer yet.
- Tone: Please keep the tone of the posts courteous and respectful. Think of this as a virtual cocktail or dinner party – don't write anything that you wouldn't say to someone in person. The anonymity of the Internet is NOT an acceptable excuse for boorish or rude behaviour.
- Please discuss specific pricing and dealer issues by private email. The Collectors Market should be used for all sales, wanted-to-buy and trading requests.

Appendix 8. Group Symbol: Exclusive Members Watch



Appendix 9. Photographs of Wrist Scan Contributions





Appendix 10. Photographs from London GTG



Caption 1: WatchZone member's only event at Jaeger LeCoultre boutique, London.



Caption 2: Researcher trying on latest Reverso by Jaeger LeCoultre.



Caption 3: End of GTG ritual.



Caption 4: Members at GTG dinner.



Caption 5: Research with Jaeger LeCoultre representative and organiser.